

THE BIG PICK-UP

by

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WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
MELBOURNE :: LONDON :: TORONTO

**To
The Un-returned**

FIRST PUBLISHED 1905

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY**

DYNAMO

AT a few minutes before seven o'clock on Sunday evening, May 26th, 1940, a signal was sent out from the Admiralty in London: *Operation Dynamo is to commence.*

The situation on that evening was one of terrible simplicity. Nearly a third of a million Britons stood on foreign soil, trapped between an enemy and a friend: between the German Army and the English Channel. For many days the British Expeditionary Force had been fighting its way to the coast, its back to the north, its face set against the south, the east and the west—the three aspects of the enemy's relentless attack. And it fought with the knowledge in mind that at any hour Belgium would collapse, and change mere danger to disaster.

Along the French coast, Boulogne and Calais were already in German hands. To the east, on the Belgian coast, Ostend was an imminent death-trap. All that remained, as a point of escape, were Dunkirk and a few miles of beach; and already Dunkirk was ablaze under the Luftwaffe's bombs.

Within seventeen hours of that first Admiralty signal, at midnight, May 27th, the King of the Belgians ordered his Army to cease fire; and to the east of Dunkirk there opened a twenty-mile gap in the flank of the B.E.F.

Two messages were sent from England at this time to the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gort. The first was from his King, and it was to be passed on immediately to the troops:

"All your countrymen have been following with pride and admiration the courageous resistance of the British Expeditionary Force during the continuous fighting of the last fortnight. Placed by circumstances outside their control in a position of extreme difficulty, they are displaying a gallantry that has never been surpassed in the annals of the British Army. The hearts of every one of us at home are with you and your magnificent troops in this hour of peril "

The second message received by Lord Gort was from his Prime Minister. Briefly and clearly it gave Lord Gort the power of making a personal decision of such gravity that only a soldier of great courage could ever have accepted it:

"If communications are broken you are to hand over and return as specified when your effective fighting force does not exceed the equivalent of three divisions. . . . The Corps Commander chosen by you should be ordered to carry on the defence in conjunction with the French, and evacuation whether from Dunkirk or the beaches, but when in his judgment no further organised evacuation is possible and no further proportionate damage can be inflicted on the enemy he is authorised in consultation with the senior French Commander to capitulate formally to avoid useless slaughter."

And at this time two messages were sent among the forces of the enemy. The first was to the German Fourth Army:

"On the orders of Field-Marshal Goering, Dunkirk is being attacked by the Luftwaffe in such a manner that further embarkations are reported to be impossible."

The second message was sent in to the German High Command from its air reconnaissance formations:

"The bulk of the German bomber forces are being employed to prevent the enemy achieving evacuation, and to annihilate him in his present state of collapse."

But the Dynamo was running. In London, on that first fearful day, it had been estimated that some 45,000 men could be brought home across the Channel in two days—if the Army could hold out that long. But the Dynamo ran on. The Army held out against the enemy not for two days but for nine. The Navy brought home not 45,000 men but a third of a million. And the Royal Air Force won a victory that

few at that time could recognise: it made this deliverance possible. From a shattered harbour and a strip of barren beach a third of a million men were carried home, in the face of the enemy's bitter resolve of total annihilation.

A few minutes after two-fifteen on the afternoon of June 4th, 1940, a second signal went out from the Admiralty in London: *Operation Dynamo has been completed.*

ONE

CORPORAL BINNS, lying on his stomach in a shallow of the ground, began counting the dive-bombers as they came across the skyline. He had counted twenty-six before he decided there was not much sense in it. It didn't matter how many there were. He lay prone, with his head tilted upwards and his mouth slightly open, watching the planes. They had seen the litter of abandoned trucks, and were climbing, and turning, and coming back. Binns began being afraid, but didn't bring his head down. For one thing, it wouldn't matter which way he was facing; for another thing, he had been afraid like this so many times during the last ten days that his fear had become habitual, and now he could let it nestle clammy in his bowels while his brain thought of something else.

He watched the dive-bombers coming down through the soft dusk light, clustered in formation, focused on this little patch of ground where the trucks were huddled beneath the tattered camouflage-nets. To Corporal Binns it seemed as if the planes were pointing directly at him, with perfect accuracy, as they came down their slope of flight to the waiting breast of the earth—pointing not just at any part of him, any part of his body, but here, between his eyes. Their great speed, their perfect focus, their deadly meaning left him hypnotised, and he stared up at them like a fool, his mouth opening wider as the sound of them rose and began vibrating in the hollow of his stomach while his eyelids trembled and the blood receded from the skin of his face, leaving it white.

He saw the first bombs coming out of the dark bellies; then there was a moment as long-drawn-out as a wedding-eve; then they struck the earth, and the earth trembled like a woman under the prone body of Binns. He shut his eyes then, and shouted into the din with his elbows digging into the soil and his hands clamped against his ears; and the din went on; and the ground shuddered beneath him; and he knew at last that this would never be over. But, after a long time, it was over, and

he was faced with the effort of having to think again, of having, to think what he must do next with this life that had, incredibly, been left to him.

Soil was in his mouth, and he raised his head, and spat, and then looked towards the trucks, remembering them. Most of them were on fire, and smoke was drifting this way, bringing its acrid chemical smell. Some of them must have disintegrated, because now he could remember the thud of fragments dropping around him, and blood was coming from the back of his hand. He rolled on to his side and began laughing quietly, his body jerking and releasing the tension while his brain tried to rationalise and find out what was so funny; but nothing was funny; it was just the muscles trying to get the knots undone.

Bellman was lurching towards him, from the line of hedging, grinning and walking like a drunk. His voice pitched into a comic hoarse-throated tone and he swallowed and tried again:

"You all right?"

Now that he was closer, Binns could see that he wasn't grinning with any amusement, any more than he himself had laughed with any amusement. Bellman's lips were drawn back, baring his teeth; and Binns thought he looked very like an animal which, after taking a beating, was still snarling its resentment, fearful of another.

Binns got up, a short barrel-shaped figure, crumpled in khaki, ballasted by his boots like one of those toy clowns that won't tip over. Binns would never tip over, either, until he was dead. He said:

"Where's Mike?"

Bellman was still breathing painfully, but was no longer grinning. He wagged a loose arm. "Through the hedge, I think."

Binns climbed out of the shallow in the earth, and began walking along the hedgerow, calling, "Mike!" Bellman stood where he was, tilting his head to listen. He had the face of an amiable lion; it was freckled and hairy-looking, with placid honey-coloured eyes. He watched Corporal Binns walking

along the hedgerow calling to Mike, and he wondered at the man's steadiness, walking like that, calling in an easy, cheerful voice. He wanted to go after him and help find Mike, but his legs were still weak and he didn't trust them, nor did he want to try to walk, and then fall over perhaps just as Binns happened to turn round. He stood thinking it was a comfort to watch Tubby Binns; that waddling figure, shapeless and unassailable, was something you could lean your eyes on, and rest assured.

"Mike!" called Binns.

"Hello?"

Binns stopped, relieved by the answer. It had come from some way off. Behind him, Bellman called out:

"He's okay."

Binns nodded, and shouted again, "Where are you, Mike?" He stood listening, his ears ignoring the background of the burning trucks that crackled beyond the trees.

"Over here!"

Bellman was coming towards the corporal, picking his way across the rolling ground with the care of a convalescent.

"Where is he, Tubby?"

"I don't know. Down along the hedge somewhere."

Bellman watched his face in the ruddled light. Dusk was almost down now, and the bonfire burned brightly, sending sparks drifting up along the evening air. Some stray ammo went off, and they jumped, then forgot it. Binns began going through the hedge, burrowing at the twigs with the confident persistence of a mole; and when he was through to the other side, Bellman followed him.

"Mike!"

"What the hell's up?"

Bellman said, "He's this way, down in the dip."

They walked along the hedge, with soil clinging to their boots. It was cooler here, for the leaves shielded their faces from the heat of the blaze. There were a score or more of three-tonners over there, most of them well alight, and sparks were coming across the hedge as thick as thistledowns.

They found Mike crouching below the cheek of the hedge,

his head buried under the leaves. Binns and Bellman stood, looking down at his legs. Binns said:

"They've gone, you know."

"What have?" Mike's legs jerked as he shifted his weight.

"Jerry."

After a few seconds, Mike pulled his head out of the leaves and said, "Of course they've gone."

"I thought you were still taking cover," Binns said.

Mike got back on to his haunches to rest.

"Don't be a prat," he said. "I'm looking for eggs."

Bellman watched the bony wedge-shaped face and the wide light-blue eyes as Mike looked up at them, and he wondered again how steady a man could be after a thing like that, after the screaming concert of the dive, the hammering of the high explosive, the searing blast, the crackle of stricken trucks. Mike was looking for eggs. He probably hadn't got to his feet, even, but had just begun putting out his hands where he lay, thinking about eggs, about something to eat. Bellman, in his envy of this calm, oblivious courage, felt angry with these two. They should have been afraid, like he had been; they should have staggered to their feet feeling sick and weak and shocked. They were human; they shouldn't behave like machines.

"Get any?" Binns asked. He straightened one of his last cigarettes and lit it. It stuck out from his mouth in a crumpled zig-zag, in perfect harmony with his whole appearance. He was like one of those advertisements for fabrics that wouldn't ever crease. Binns wouldn't ever be smooth, because this was his personality.

"Couple," Mike grunted. He got up, and stood towering over them, taking two hens' eggs out of his battle-dress blouse with the pride of a comic female impersonator revealing the secrets of his act.

Binns and Bellman looked gravely at the eggs, feeling that the sight of them should bring hunger back; but it did not. The last food they had eaten was a gluey mass of biscuits and margarine, pounded together by the rigours of two days' march and intermittent exhausted sleep, huddled in ditches. If these eggs had been put in front of them sizzling from a pan they

• might have salivated painfully before falling upon them; but in their shells they didn't look like food.

"Nice work," said Binns dutifully. Mike was crouching again with his long arms working at the hedge, parting the roots and weeds while his face puckered about his eyes as they probed the shadows.

"Look," Binns said, "we'd better get a shift on."

"Why?"

"Before Jerry comes back."

"He won't come back," Mike said, "he's been."

"He'll come back to see what else there is, and there'll be other lots coming over to take a look."

Mike said in a reasonable tone, "Well, I don't mind them taking a look." He loped down the hedge on his haunches, foraging in fresh places.

Binns smoked his cigarette, trying to enjoy it; but his mouth was still sour from the shock of the raid. He said:

"Now don't be a twirp, Mike. Those trucks aren't the only stuff lying about in this area, and that blaze is going to attract a lot of attention. I'm getting out, and so's Dave, and so are you." He looked at Bellman and said, "Haven't you got a fag, Dave?"

Bellman said he didn't feel like one. They turned away from the hedge and began climbing out of the dip. Mike followed them, moaning and carping, "Bloody fine thing, me trying to find something to fill our jolly belly, and all you can think of is another ten-mile slog."

Binns didn't answer. He knew that somewhere to the south there was a village, because yesterday he had seen a church spire, five or six miles off. The place might be still inhabited, deserted, or in German hands. He had seen a ragged convoy crawling along the high eastern ridge above the spire yesterday; they might have been the first organised transports of refugees, or a withdrawing French column, or an advance motorised German unit. From here they couldn't tell. They had to go there, to find out. They had to find somewhere to sleep, and to eat, and to think. Afterwards they could climb the eastern ridge and try to see whether they were walking straight

into a Jerry division, or their own lines, or in circles.

They had to find some of their own boys, and go with them, wherever they were going. Binns didn't believe they could do this, because he had a private theory: that they were already cut off in a local pocket, surrounded by Jerry. He kept this to himself, because he believed in it. Whatever orders their unit had received, they must have been urgent, to make the lot of them clear off, abandoning a score of trucks and technical stores, and leaving their parachute-patrols out in the blue. There was a rout on, that was what Binns thought; a big one, this time, not just a quick nip back across the Belgian frontier. They were dumping their stuff, even dumping their men.

"They must've been in a sweaty hurry," Bellman said. He was thinking about it, too. He still felt bitter that their own troops had left them four miles out in a pitch-dark wood, poking for non-existent parachutists among the trees, while the rest of them had quietly packed up and crept away, without even a scrap of paper pinned to a door to say where they had gone. He said, "They might have left a clue, mightn't they? Just one little festering clue?"

Binns said, "Yes, for Jerry to pick up. Think it out for yourself, Dave. They got orders to clear out quick, and dump the stuff. How long d'you think it would've taken them to find us, in the middle of a wood? And how many of them would we have picked off before we realised they weren't fifth-columnists? Think it out."

They walked for two miles, going due south with Binns jerking his head up to check the stars every five minutes, and the glow of the burning trucks dying away against leaves and stones and grass. It was almost dark now, but for the last of the glow and the pale sheen of starlight on smooth surfaces. They kept together, Mike holding his two hens' eggs gently in his huge grimed hand, Bellman remembering the way the ground had trembled under the bombs and the way his one rational thought had persisted in his brain during the long-drawn shock of destruction: the thought that he mustn't foul his clothes, whatever happened he mustn't do that, because that would be the final humiliation.

They crossed three earth tracks, passing a broken gate, a burned-out barn, a farm-cart lying on its side; and when they were in the middle of some ploughed land they saw the sudden rack of light spread up to the north-west.

"Christ," said Mike slowly. They stopped, and stood with their heads turned, waiting. After a few seconds the sound of the barrage came, and Bellman said something that was lost in the thunder. In a moment Binns said:

"Firing east."

The line of light flared again, and again the ground shook under their feet. Mike's lean face was silhouetted against the glow of the trucks, and Bellman was watching it, to catch his reaction. But there was no reaction. Mike's eyes were a little wide, that was all, and he didn't blink, even when the third barrage started up. He just looked like an animal, alerted and calculating. Bellman wished his own face looked like that. He knew what his own face looked like. Just frightened.

"Well," said Binns, "come on. That's someone else's party."

They walked on, and no one said another word for a long time, because at regular half-minute intervals the ground ahead of them was lit from the north-west, and the ground under them shuddered, and the sound came pressing against the back of their necks, wrapping around their heads.

It took them two hours and a little more to reach the first building of Binns's village. It was a small farm-house, and they stood in the yard, listening.

"If there's anyone——" Mike began, but Binns said softly:

"Shut up."

They listened again. The guns had ceased fire half an hour ago. The blaze of trucks was now a blob of warm orange in the gloom. There was no sound, not of a man or a dog or any beast or thing. Binns looked round his feet and picked up a stone, slinging it at the nearest window that caught the star-light. The shattering of the pane scraped at their nerves and they waited for more than a minute; then Mike said:

"Place is dead, my cock-o's."

Binns said, "I don't like it much."

"Why the hell not?" asked Bellman, courageous in the silence and the dark.

"They've cleared out, to a man. They wouldn't've done that if Jerry wasn't coming. The whole village has gone."

Mike said, "Well, we might as well kip the night here. There's nowhere else. I want to cook my eggs."

"All right," Binns said, "we'll go in, but we'll have to post a look-out. We can get caught with our trousers right down, too easy, here." He walked over the cobbles and pushed open a door, waiting for a moment before he went inside. There was no hall; this was the living-room and kitchen. A glow from the range picked out the highlights on picture-frames, the back of a chair, the crucifix in the far corner, three copper pans, an oil-lamp on the table. There was the smell of food in here, and for the first time Binns felt hunger again, or something near remembered hunger: a mixed feeling of nausea and nostalgia.

The other two came quietly in behind him and they stood just inside the room, feeling unwanted, unannounced, as unwelcome as creeping thieves. They had been in many rooms like this one, but always under the auspices of the billeting officer; and there had always been men and women smiling to them or just watching them with quiet, reserved faces, and children running up to stare, shouting fragments of *patois* and then running back to the older ones, laughing, piercing the air with cries.

Here there was only the silence, and the glow of the stove, and the painful atmosphere of loss: loss of the lamp, the crucifix, this room, this house, this land. Worse than thieves, the three of them felt like invaders here.

Binns said roughly, "Dave, nip upstairs and keep a look-out. You can do first turn. Concentrate on east and west, and if you're going to smoke, make sure the match doesn't show. One of us'll be up there some time to take over."

Bellman found the stairs in the gloom. "Why east and west?"

Binns said, "We've come south, and we'd have run into Jerry or refugees, one or the other, if they were advancing

north or south." As Bellman started to climb the stairs, Binns said to Mike, "What about those eggs, then?"

"I'm going to get some more."

"Where from?"

"This is a farm-house, isn't it?"

"I can't hear any hens."

"I'm not after hens, I'm after eggs. There'll be some left behind." He went out into the yard. Binns stood for a few seconds, looking reflectively at the brass crucifix, thinking about the eggs, thinking that whatever you were, a hen or a man, British or French or Belgian, you left your things behind, your eggs, your house, your trucks, your mates.

He went round the windows, testing the black-out. Some were painted over with the familiar dark blue; others had curtains made of canvas, loam bags, sacks, aprons, anything that hadn't much of a hole in. He lit the oil-lamp, leaving the flame very low, and went outside, coming back two or three times to cover a chink at the windows. When he was satisfied, he turned the flame of the lamp higher, and then remembered Mike, and pulled the rickety beaded screen across the door. When Mike opened a door he opened it wide enough to get a tank through. He'd gone out for eggs and he'd bring back a dozen. With that lofty it was always the lot or nothing.

Corporal Binns looked at his hand. The blood had dried, long ago, and it was itching pleasantly. There was nothing in the wound; it was hardly a wound, even. They'd been lucky, the three of them. He stood in the middle of the room, in the middle of the unnerving quiet. The quiet wouldn't last long. This was the lull between the fleeing refugee and the tramping invader. They'd been lucky, all right, before; and they'd have to be lucky again to get out of here with their skin on.

The rickety screen went down with a crash as Mike threw the door open and came in. Binns cried out, "Shut that door, you stupid twirp!"

"Well, fancy leaving that bloody thing there!"

"It's for the black-out!"

"Well, you could've told me, couldn't you?"

Mike shut the door and waited until Binns had picked the screen up and set it right. On the stone floor was a smashed, spread-eagled egg. Mike said, "You might've had the lot out of my hands." He stood cupping the rest of the eggs; there were six or seven, one of them a duck's.

"I should have warned you it was there," said Binns evenly.

"Now you're talking," said Mike, mollified.

"Yes," Binns said, "I should've known you'd come in like a pregnant camel with its arse on fire." He helped Mike put the eggs into a wicker-work tray that was on the table. "Look, I'm going to leave you to carry on with getting the food cooked, while I try and have a shower under the pump out there. Then I'll take over from you, while you get a shower. When you two have had your grub you can get some kip."

Mike was having a look round the cupboards in search of bread.

"All right, my cock-o," he said.

Binns opened the door carefully and pushed through the gap. In the cobbled yard it was peaceful; there was no wind; there was starlight, brightening slowly as his eyes accommodated; there was the brash, sweet smell of herbs and animals, and, just detectable, the acrid taint of smoke from the burning trucks, five miles up-wind. He wandered to the gate and looked northwards. In the velvet dark there was nothing more than a flush of rouge in the distance, where the herd of three-tonners had been.

The corporal tried to remember a farm he had visited once, a very long time ago, when his mother had died and he had been sent away to relatives. Among all the fascinating holes and corners of the farm there had been a wash-house; he could remember grey hair and red elbows, suds and buttons and white scrubbed wood. So he turned away from the gate and began trying the doors in the gloom, coming upon a stable with its stable-smell of bran and dung and leather, an empty shed with nothing but the smell of damp and fibre, a store-house with the tang of paraffin, a hen-house with stale pungent air, its fruits plundered by Mike. And yes, there was a wash-house. He stood sniffing inside the doorway, and the pictures of raw

elbows and bleached wood sprang up brightly, and he could remember the woman's face, his aunt's face quiet with philosophy about her sister's death.

The long narrow window was hardly lighter than the walls; the wash-house was at one end of the yard, butting on to the main building, and the window was less than a couple of feet from a stone wall that held in half the yard. So Binns shut the door and risked a match. There was everything here: a tank in the rafters, a sink the size of a bath, two taps and a chunk of yellow soap. This was the Ritz.

Mike looked at the loaf and turned it in the light of the lamp. There wasn't much mould on it, and there were no signs that mice had ever got at it. He scraped away what little mould there was, and cut three thick slices. It sounded like hacking through coke, but never mind, you couldn't expect caviare and chips in a dump like this. He worked steadily, thinking about nothing but what his hands were doing, finding the mess-tins and irons from their kits, poking the range brighter, breaking three eggs into the pan of fat that he had found on the grid, watching them fry. There was nothing he wanted to remember about the last ten days, nothing in particular along the film-strip of rolling wheels, shoulders moving in the line of march, the wings of F.W.s and Dorniers tilting across the blue and screaming down to harry and weave with death dropping out of their bellies, poor Bob Crockett catching it right in the back and pitching down dead with the cigarette flicking away; nothing in particular along the sound-track of engines and shouted orders, the tramp of boots and the ring of shrapnel on a tin-hat, the scream of planes and the scream of a man, the hollow thumping of B Echelon's twenty-five-pounders, the snore of Corporal Binns beside him in a ditch.

Those things were the past, and nothing had come out of them, nothing new. The future hadn't got here yet. But there were eggs, and bread, and fat, and a pump outside in the yard, and beds upstairs. He thought about these, and, while the eggs were frying and there was nothing for his hands to do, about women.

Bellman leaned against the small, high window of the attic. The ledge of the window was just about chest-high, and he stood with his arms folded and braced along it, his face a few inches from the glass. The glass had been painted with dark-blue black-out that had chipped away easily under his knife, but his breath clouded it again and again, and he had to keep wiping it clear. He was looking east, over a crenellated frieze of roof-tops that made a tumbling skyline as far as the sudden spike of the church spire. When he had first come up here, picking his way among bric-à-brac to this small, high place, the sky had been a mere faint contrast to the solid dark of the roofs; but now it was flushed with orange, like a freak sunrise. It was fire, and more than that he couldn't know. A village, a town, a convoy, a wagon-line—something was ablaze. From here it was picturesque; the colours, changing from orange to deep vermilion, spreading fanwise below the stars, were pretty to see. Nothing else carried as far as here, to this high window, nothing of the panic, the horror, the roasting alive, the inconsolable terror in children's eyes.

Bellman was trying not to think. There was so much to think about that it was like trying not to swallow water in a maelstrom sea. The matter that he wanted to bring into focus was the difference between war and peace. In peace if you heard that a child was trapped in a blazing house, you would run there, whether you were English or French or German, you would run there, if you were a human of any race or colour or flag, run there, whatever you had been doing before, run there as fast as you could, shouting to others to run with you, because of the child, because it mustn't stay there and burn, and die, if you could help it, whoever you were. But if you had taken the oath, and saluted, and changed into these other clothes, you did not run to the burning house to save the child; worse, you did not even stand still and refuse; worse, you did not even run the other way, to safety of your own. You burned the house, and burned the child alive, and you did it to the best of your ability.

Bellman had a child. Donald, two and a half. And men were trying to burn his child alive, while he tried to burn theirs. And that was the difference between war and peace—but what

in God's name could you call it, this difference? A turning of the brain? A change of heart? A reversion to barbarism in the midstream of civilisation? Or longer words, more complicated phrases? Was there a *word* for a thing like this, really a single word that wouldn't stick in the throat and choke you before you could say it to a soul?

He could not think of a word; he had never been able to think of one, when the bombs had come straddling down across the trees, when he and Bob Crockett and Sammy had sown the mines and come away, hoping that men would walk on them and become pulp, when he had lain stomach-down a few hours ago with bedlam bursting across his back; and he couldn't think of a word now, as he stood by the window and watched the flush in the sky. There were things in life that were nameless, and unthinkable. You had to live with them, and never know what they were. You had to be a part of them, and party to them and to their evil. When ordered to murder children you had to obey; otherwise you would be an eccentric, a misfit, a conscientious objector, a heretic, abnormal, cast out, lost.

So he was here, Sapper Bellman, R.E., standing at a window on his corporal's orders, doing his duty according to the gospel of K.R.s, and trying to believe he wasn't crazy, the whole world wasn't crazy. And it took some doing, that did, some bloody doing.

He stood back from the window and smashed the glass out, so that he wouldn't have to keep wiping his breath off it every five minutes, and so that he could break something and make a noise about it, relieving his frustration and his fear.

He heard Mike's voice, "What the hell's that, now?"

Bellman called, "Nothing. How's those eggs coming along, for Chris' sake?"

He could smell the frying, and it was beginning to be a torture. Fragments of glass pattered down as he ran the butt of his rifle along the frame. Cool air swam against his face, easing his eyes, clearing his lungs of the frying smell. He could see better now through the window. The flush in the sky looked prettier now, prettier still.

Binns heard a voice across the yard, "Grub up!"

When he came into the farm-house, edging through the gap in the door and past the screen, he said, "Listen, there's no need to shout the odds at the top of your voice. This isn't a desert island, you know."

Mike was standing to attention by the table, with some sort of apron round his waist and a chef's hat that was obviously an outsize pair of drawers filched from a wardrobe upstairs. On the table was a clean white runner, and their three mess-tins were placed neatly along it, irons beside them. In the middle there stood a bottle of red wine, and a hideous vase of dusty imitation flowers that must have been won at a fair ten years ago, and was better suited to a graveside.

"Dinner is served!" said Mike, gazing steadfastly at the ceiling. His act was so painfully unfunny that Binns was touched and amused. At least this was better than sitting hopeless and helpless on a chair and worrying about their position. There had been one or two boys in the Platoon who would be doing that, in a place and at a time like this, with no trouble at all. Mike wasn't one of them, thank God. Bellman was all right, too. He'd gone up there without a squawk and was keeping look-out while, for all he knew, his two mates might have been down here scoffing grub and forgetting his existence.

Binns had enjoyed his wash, and now there was this little scene. He felt better than he had for the past week. Dave was an introspective cuss with too much imagination, and Mike was an awkward elephant of a man with no imagination at all apart from a swaddy's cunning, but Binns felt he could soldier a long way with these two, if it came to that.

"Bully for you, Mike. A bit like a tart's dressing-table, but it'll do. What's on your bonce, for God's sake?"

Mike kept up his rigid stance of attention.

"Frenchwoman's knickers, Corporal."

Binns came over to look at the wine. "All right, you can serve dinner, Sapper Russell."

Mike swung round to the stove. "About time, too. Here's me been working me knuckles to me armpits trying to keep

things hot, while you're out there like a duck up a creek." He shook a slice of bread and a fried egg out of the pan into Binns's mess-tin. "What about old Dave?"

Binns sat down at the table. "I'll nip up there and send him down, in a minute."

Mike pulled the drawers off his head and draped them over a chair, putting Binns's mess-tin on to the table.

"There's no salt, my cock-o, and no Worcester sauce." He lisped like a queen. "It's that wretched grocer's boy, forgetting again."

He tossed a fried egg into his mess-tin and edged a slice of fried bread on top of it, breaking three more eggs into the pan and sitting down. "More to come," he said, "so fill your jolly belly, my boy."

Binns poured some wine into their mugs.

"My oath," he said, "this is the life."

"All right, isn't it?"

"It's the life."

In a little while, Binns went upstairs. Bellman was at the window, looking east.

"Seen anything, Dave?"

"Not a sausage, only that fire. It's all dark from the other window."

Binns gazed at the glow along the skyline, and said:

"That'll be Rocquefaux." He remembered the town; their unit had come through it, down from the frontier. A lot of people had still been there, very different from before, when the unit had been moving east into Belgium. Then there had been smiles and cheers and flowers and outstretched hands for the gallant British who were going to meet the foe. Three days later, when the gallant British were seen coming back, their faces set and with stubble on them, their transport grazed and with buckled wings, there were no smiles, no flowers, no cheers. There were shouts, and there were fists. The idea was that the British should meet the enemy in Belgium and keep him out of France; and the enemy's idea was different; and for the moment he was the stronger.

A few families had started to leave Rocquefaux in the wake

of the retreat; now they were all leaving, those who could, who were strong enough, young enough, quick enough, those who hadn't been buried by the bombs in that inferno over there.

Binns remembered a fountain in Rocquetaux, a fountain in a square. Children had been clustered on it, clinging and waving and yelling, "Tomm-ee! Tomm-ee!" at the top of their voices. He hadn't noticed the fountain, coming back along the same road. There wouldn't have been any children on it. Now there was probably just a hole in the square, with the stripped skeletons of trees leaning round it, their leaves, their buds, their birds gone, and the children gone from home.

He said to Bellman, "Go and get some grub. Mike's got the place dolled up like Fortnum and Mason's, down there. Take your time."

As Bellman was halfway down the stairs, Binns called, "And there's a wash-house, out at the back, with soap and the lot. Tell Mike too."

He stood at the window, watching the glow in the east.

Binns stayed at the look-out till two in the morning, and then got Mike to take over. He had worked out a plan that would give them each as much sleep as possible until dawn: supposing that they would be left in peace until then.

Bellman had lain down on the huge double bed with most of his clothes on, helmet and rifle by his side; after half an hour he slept, uneasily. Mike made a pig of himself as usual, demanding the lot or nothing: he chose a single bed in the same room, convinced that it was a young virgin's (one always managed to convince oneself of this, unless one actually unearthed pipe-ash or a set of dentures from the bedclothes); and he stripped right off, laying his clothes carefully over a chair; and he played about with various pillows and bolsters until he was satisfied. This was the first bed he'd slept in for five days, the first real bed with springs and a mattress and sheets, and he was going to do it justice. He lay luxuriating, his eyes innocently closed, and pictured the exact details of the young virgin whose bed this obviously had been. She'd be the farmer's daughter, say eighteen or nineteen, with long legs and breasts pouting in a

blouse—but a modest girl, nothing tarty about her, nothing like that. Dark hair. Nice teeth—a good smile. A bit of English, enough to know what he meant until he could tell her without having to say anything. He'd call her Louise. It didn't matter what her name was, he'd call her that. Louise. And she'd call him Mike, and she'd say it with a slight accent, very softly, over and over again. Mike. Mike. . . .

"Mike."

He chuckled and rolled her over, catching his foot on the brass bed-rail and letting out a curse.

"Mike, come on."

Binns's voice. Bloody Binns.

He said loudly, "What the hell's up now?"

"Keep it low," said Binns. Binns was a shadow humped against the ceiling. "You'll wake Dave up. Come on, it's your spell."

Mike sat up. "I've only been here two minutes, what the hell are you talking about?" He tried to remember where he had left his clothes.

"You've been there two hours," said Binns. He took off his boots. He had done half Mike's shift as it was, and he was dead on his feet.

Mike cracked his head on a beam and cursed again, and Binns said, "Can't you shut up, you great clod? Dave wants his kip."

"I can't see a blind thing——"

"Well, put the lights on and bring Jerry here——"

"I don't want Jerry, I want me togs."

Binns listened to him getting dressed. It was like listening to a drunken wrestler fighting off a hatstand full of umbrellas. "For the sake of all hell . . ." he muttered.

"I'm going," said Mike from the doorway. "I'm going." He sounded hearty now, like a lion refreshed. "Hey, did we finish off that bottle o' red ink down there?"

Binns tugged the blankets over him. "No. And you're not finishing it now, chum. You're on duty, so just get up there."

"Nuts to you too, love," said Mike with cheerful acceptance,

and went clumping up the stairs. He found they had bashed the glass out of the other window, the one facing west. A cool draught was coursing through the attic, bringing the fresh damp smell of mist from across the fields. From the east window he could see the last glow of the fire, a deeper red now, and lower along the skyline. From the west window he could still make out nothing but the faint outlines of the village.

He lit a cigarette, shielding the match, and waited for his eyes to take in the gloom again. Outside, it was silent. Only a faint tremor came now and then, from a long way off. Somewhere was being bombed, or there was a barrage going up; but it was miles away. They'd left the war behind. For three months, since they had crossed from England, the war hadn't even started. Then there'd been a fortnight of it, when Jerry had suddenly chucked the lot down on Belgium, driving them back over the frontier. Now the unit had packed up and gone to God knew where, and they'd left the war behind. That was all right, so long as they could find their mob and get cracking again when they'd had enough scoff and kip. Just for a bit, this lark was all right.

For an hour there was silence, and nothing seen. Then, so gradually that Mike missed it at first, sound came into the night. It came from above and to the south, and when he heard it, he stared upwards, pushing his head through the window-frame. There was nothing up there but the stars, and the slowly-rising drone. It swelled, over the long minutes, until he could feel the vibration under his feet; and there came the slow, irregular rhythm of engines running at variance. It was not easy just to listen, to do nothing, just to listen; it was not easy, especially for a man like Mike, who liked to get his hands busy when there was trouble.

He listened for minutes, and then dragged a lumber-box across to the east window, and stood on it, and tried to press his shoulders through the window-frame, the better to crane and see the south sky. He got halfway through, ripping his battle-dress blouse on the ridges of broken glass; but there was nothing to see. There was only the sound, rising still, loudening to a long-drawn solid roar that filled the dark.

Mike got his shoulders back and went downstairs, the clump of his boots hardly audible above the great black drone. He stood in the yard, his face tilted, listening, watching, for a full two minutes before he saw the presence in the air. He could not see the bombers: he could only see, over a great area, the stars going out, winking again, again going out. The mesh of wings was drawing across the sky, from south-east to north-west, and the stars were flickering as if in a vast wind.

Mike was afraid. They weren't going to drop anything here; that lot could wipe out a town, and this was an empty village; they weren't going to harm him, this single man standing alone in a yard, watching them go by. But this gross unceasing drone reached farther than his ears; it throbbed deep in his guts, plucking at them like hands on a stringed instrument. And the stars, that had shone there steadily for unknown centuries, were flickering. They were not aeroplanes, not anything plural, not machines with men in them; they were a single, awful thing, sprawled across the night without a name. He was watching a malevolence, and he was afraid of its sound and its size.

He stood there with his head turning slowly, a human radar-finder, swivelling. After a time—and he could never have told how long—the sound died away, and the starfields were steady again. Silence did not return completely; the presence of the malevolence was still in the air, sounding back from the hills in a shuttle of echoes that never waned. Mike went upstairs, and felt his way into the attic, jerking his breath as a dark figure moved beside the east window. His nerves were touchy tonight.

"Where've you been?" Binns's voice.

"To look at that lot."

"Oh. How many?"

"God knows. Hundreds." The sound was still in the night; the dark had been dyed by it, and silence would always sound like this.

Mike looked out through the west window, and after a minute said, "Christ, they're dropping the crap."

Binns came over to him. "Where?"

"North-west. Jesus!"

Between the earth and the sky, between the east ridge of hills and the forest near Chambisse, the dark was being pocked with sunbursts. The tremble came, seconds later, and a broken dish was set rattling somewhere in the attic lumber. Binns pulled him away from the window and took a look. Mike leaned against the slope of the wall. He could not now see the horizon, but sparks of light had begun glinting along the edge of the broken glass in the window-frame, a diamond glimmer to accompany the steady trembling of the floor. He watched it until Binns drew his head back into the room.

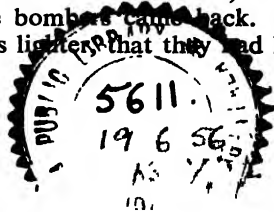
"North-west," he said. "That's where that barrage was, earlier."

Mike said, "Yep." There was nothing else he wanted to say about it. He wanted to forget it, ignore it, dismiss it as something remote that didn't concern them, here. He said, "Why don't you go and get the rest of your kip?"

Binns said he would, and went down the passage, making no noise in his socks. Within a few seconds of his going, the farmhouse shuddered, and Mike cursed. Something big had gone up, in the north-west—an ammo-dump or a storage-tank. He pushed his head out of the west window, and saw the blood-red light that was seeping upwards from the earth like a weeping wound. And at the same moment he heard a different sound, so faint and so strangely-pitched that his scalp crept. It was the sound of cheering. Of men cheering.

It came only once, but it echoed in his head. It had been a trick of acoustics, a rush of wind across the tree-tops, a draught fluting through the gaps of tiles, a swinging door, anything like that, anything natural.

He came away from the window, and felt for a cigarette. There were none left. Tubby would give him one, but he might be asleep again. It didn't matter. If he couldn't stand the strain of keeping look-out for a short spell, without having to suck at a fag like a kid with a dummy, he wasn't much good. He said aloud, "Forget it, you hairy-headed puck-o," and the sound of his voice reassured him. In fifteen minutes, much sooner than he had expected, the bombs came back. He tried to believe that the sound was lighters that they had left



many of their number ablaze on the ground in the north-west, stewing in their own juice. But the sound seemed as heavy as before. It swelled to its peak and then, with exquisite slowness, diminished down the night; and by these fine degrees the weight was lifted from Mike's chest, and he breathed freely, his lungs no longer choked by the din.

He realised now that faint light was coming into the attic, frosting smooth surfaces among the bric-à-brac. The east window was a pale square, and a long sliver of light was brightening down the church spire. Light touched a window-pane of a tall house across the roofs, reddened a chimney-stack, gilded a weather-vane, glinted along the broken glass that topped a garden wall. Dull outlines became sketched from an eave to a parapet, from the church to the tall house; and in a gap between two corners the domes of cobblestones became slowly dappled with light.

There were sounds too, of a waking village, and for a few moments Mike listened to them placidly, linking them in his mind with the natural order of things: the rousing of early risers as dawn came and the first birds sang. A door banged and voices called, and he realised with a shock that the village was not deserted. His neck stiffened and he stood on something, pulling himself higher against the window-frame. Minutes passed and he heard other sounds: the tramp of feet, an engine, another starting up; and there was movement in the wan light, slow movement among the farthest cottages, down from the hill. There was a road down the hill, and the movement was there, and the sound of engines neared.

From a closer place, feet tramped again, many of them, their sound regular and militant. A voice shouted an order, and Mike came away from the window with a jerk because the order was in German, clear and guttural. He clouted his shoulder against the door-post and his rifle knocked something over as he went down the passage, lurching through the dim light into the bedroom at the end.

"Jerry's here!" He half-pulled Binns from the bed. "Jerry's here!"

"Wha'?"

“Jerry’s here!”

Binns came off the bed in a bundle and Bellman’s tin-hat clattered to the floor as Mike shook him awake. “We gotter get out, quick!” His long arm heaved Bellman off the bed. “Jerry’s here!”

TWO

THEY had managed to get most of their equipment on. Each had a tin-hat, rifle, webbing. It was going to be a retreat, not a rout. It had not been easy, getting their things together while the sound of marching feet had loudened in the village. A squad had gone past the front of the farm-house and had turned into a lane, halting. Trucks were bumping across cobbles, and orders were being shouted.

Bellman and Mike stood in the doorway at the back. Binns was just outside, cocking his head, one hand out behind him, stiff and with fingers spread, keeping them where they were, making them wait. Bellman's mouth was sour and there was a fluttering in his stomach; his breath came pushing out as if he had just waded waist-deep into chill water. Mike was watching the line of hedge beyond the yard. He thought that was where Binns would take them first. He trusted in Binns. He would never trust in himself again. He should have seen them coming, sooner. The noise of the bombers on their way back had drowned the first sounds of the convoy dropping into the village from the hill road, but he could have seen it, if he'd really been looking. He'd muffed his job and the three of them were here, half in a trap. He should have been warned, too; when the bombs had been going down in the north-west, he had heard cheering, the cheering of men. Coming down the hill from the eastern ridge, they had seen the raid, and had known they were their own bombers, up from the south-east; and they had let up a cheer—only one, because the officers and N.C.O.s would have clamped down on them hard. But Mike had heard it, and thought it was the wind, or a door. Standing there like a bloody clod, listening to Jerry coming down the road.

Corporal Binns turned his head again, this time to the right. He hoped some of them would start marching, and cover the rattle of their own footsteps across the yard. A truck pulled up, very near; it had stopped in front of the farm-house, by the sound of it.

Quietly Mike said, "Let's take a chance."

Binns did not move. He knew that unless he moved, Mike wouldn't move either, nor Bellman. For all their friendship there was a rigid discipline, hard under the surface. He heard men clattering off the truck, and a few seconds later a door at the front of the farm-house came open, banging against the wall. Bellman tried to get a word out but his throat was blocked. They heard boots in the house, and voices.

Binns said, "Come on—that hedge."

They broke cover at the double and didn't look anywhere except at the hedge, where there was a gap and then some wire and then a gate. Mike slipped on some muck across the cobbles and cursed. Binns's feet were flying, taking him diagonally towards the gap in the hedge. Mike and Bellman were a yard behind, one on each side. A shout went up from the house and Binns took a dive to the left and went at the gate, using his free left hand to swing across it and land clear in time for the other two to find room. There was a lot of shouting now and they started running hard across bare earth, cutting into a corner of the field and finding a bit of cover where the ground sloped off to a shallow. The first bullet went wide, tracking into the leaves of the hedge, but after that there was a fusillade and the air whined near their heads. Binns took them past a silo and dodged left, using its cover while they ran on across a triangle of open ground towards a line of trees.

It was not full daylight yet but the air was clear and there was no mist. The trees gave them a bit of background-camouflage, but the range was short. It was a question of time, of yards. Another fusillade came and Bellman pitched over without any sound. Mike yelled at Binns and Binns broke his run and dodged back. They each got Bellman under one arm and went on, dragging him between them with his boots bumping over the grass and his head jerking. They reached the trees and went through, dropping into the ditch on the other side and darting to the right. A burst from a machine-gun came ploughing into the saplings a few yards behind them, but the ditch gave them a parados on their flank, and Binns called out for Mike to stop. Bellman dropped awkwardly, face down.

Binns turned him over and felt for the heart. Mike crouched beside them, the breath scraping in and out of his throat.

Binns said, "Had it." Rapid fire came through the tree-boles directly above their heads and he told Mike, "Cut an' run—get to that wood."

"I'm not leaving——"

"*Run, damn you!*"

Mike cursed him and started away again in a crouching lope along the ditch. The explosion of a grenade deafened them both and their hands came up as the shrapnel sang, but Mike ran on with one glance behind him to see about Binns. Binns was tearing the watch off Bellman's wrist and the wallet out of his battle-dress, stuffing them into his blouse and getting up, running low along the ditch as the machine-gun came raking in a slow deliberate arc through the saplings, ripping slivers of bark off their stems.

Two more grenades came over, exploding almost in unison, and a fragment caught Binns on the shoulder, spinning him half-round in his run; but he straightened and kept on, calling to Mike to go faster, because Mike wasn't trying, wasn't going to try until Binns caught up with him.

Another grenade burst, but it was well short of them. There was no more fire from the machine-gun, and no more single shots. Mike heard Binns coming up close and put on a spurt, and they ran together, leaving the line of trees and dropping to lower land towards the fringe of the wood. They ran for ten minutes at a quick jog and reached the wood, running on through brambles and then zig-zagging along a rough path. Mike said something but Binns said, "Keep going." The rasp of their breath was as loud as the thud of their feet. Binns switched his Enfield to his left hand, because his right shoulder was growing numb.

Clearing the wood and making across an angle of scrub, they slowed to a steady walk. Neither spoke. Sweat had soaked them, long ago, and their throats were raw. Binns's shoulder-blade felt hot, and he kept his rifle in his left hand. They walked for an hour, then Binns said, "Ten-minute break."

They were on a mud-track, ribbed with wheel-ruts, and there was a stream under a rough stone bridge. Binns said, "Down there."

They dropped through brambles and crouched, floundering sideways under the bridge. They slumped down among nettles.

In a little time, Mike said, "Had it, eh?"

"Yes."

Binns pulled the wallet out of his blouse and stuffed it into the breast-pocket against his own. He looked for a minute at the watch. It was a Rolex. Dave had bought it from a Frenchman. Mike said, "What's that?"

"His watch."

Mike said softly, "Christ, yes, it was a beauty, wasn't it?" It sounded, the way he said it, as if the watch had been lost, and not Dave.

Binns put it away, buttoning his pocket.

"He's got a kid, name's Don. Be for him."

"Ye'."

They lay on their backs, watching the ripples of light flowing across the arch of stones, cast upwards from the water by the first faint sun of the morning.

Toward noon they sighted a road, with moving figures. They had been going steadily north, following their shadows across flat country. Clouds had come up soon after they had left the bridge, and it was cooler; then the sky had cleared again and they were walking now through bright sunshine, climbing the rungs of shadows cast by serried poplars as the narrower way turned east, leading them half-north again towards the main road.

They had stopped, to study the moving figures, making sure about them before going on. They were refugees, a mile-long gaggle of men and women and children, pushing and hauling barrows, prams, carts that were piled with shapeless bundles. A few bicycles; a dark humped man on a horse; a man carrying a child on his shoulders, singing; a woman holding a child against her chest, crying; two cows, their bells donging as they

lurched behind their tethers; many goats, their delicate legs finding a way along the shelving roadside, while a group of small boys raced along the field, keeping the goats from straying.

Binns said, "They might be from our village."

"They've been taking their time, then."

"Going in circles, maybe."

They walked more steadily, heading across the water-meadows to the front of the refugee column. When they were noticed, a chorus went up, and arms waved; but neither knew any French and it was difficult to see from this distance whether the arms were beckoning or shaking fists.

"Think we're welcome?" Mike asked.

"I don't give a damn. I want to find out if they've seen any of our mob."

They climbed to the ridge of the road amid the music of the goats' bells and the cries of the small boys. A lopsided motor-van went by, honking its way in zig-zags through the shambles, with people clinging to it as thick as flies on a flypaper. Steam clouded from the radiator as thickly as dust from its wheels; in its wake there rose a chorus of angry voices. Now that Binns and Mike had joined the line and become part of it, no more notice was taken of them, until Binns began tackling a thin loping man who was bent double over a barrow loaded so high that a wheel was scraping on the timber, slewing it bodily to one side in jerks, while the man jerked it back.

Mike put his rifle across the baggage and started pushing, keeping the barrow straight while Binns said to the man, "*Anglais*—where?" He waved to the man, pointing this way and that, saying "*Anglais*?" and shrugging eloquently. The man shrugged back, as interested in Binns as he would have been in a stray cow, until Binns remembered one of the few words he had ever picked up, and began again, "Tomm-ee—oo? Oo?"

The man shook his head, and then called out sharply to Mike as the barrow ran into something ahead of them. Mike dodged round to the front, "Come on then, out the bloody way, can't you?" A wheel had come off a pram, and two boys

were half-dragging it along, a woman screaming at them. Binns shouted at the thin man, "Tomm-ee—English—oo?"

The pram was dragged to the roadside and Mike got the barrow going on a straight course again. The woman's voice faded away behind them. The thin man might have been deaf, now, for all the notice he was taking of Binns, so Binns walked on ahead, and Mike watched him gesticulating to a thick-legged girl; she was carrying a sack, and when Binns made to take it from her, to carry it for a while, she let out a scream and swung a hand across his face, thinking he meant to steal it. Binns stood in the road and let her go, and heard Mike laughing like a clod from beside the barrow.

Two other girls were laughing shrilly, and Binns went red at the neck, conscious that a British soldier was making a fool of himself among a mob of Froggies. Only rarely, at times like this, did he ever remember that he was short, and shapeless, and, as a figure of a man, the reverse of impressive. He swung round:

"Mike! Pick up your rifle and leave that barrow!"

Mike slung his Enfield and let the barrow go by, and said cheerfully, "Get no change out of this lot, will we? Bloody shower!" He felt sorry for Binns. Binns was a good little puck-o, better than all this lot put together.

Binns said, "We'll go on ahead of 'em." They walked quickly, side by side, and Mike fell into step, shortening his stride, trying to make it look like a sapper and a corporal marching down a road. They had gone less than a hundred yards before the F.W.s came down on the column, from the south, out of the sun.

There were only a few of them but they had come down very fast out of a dive and they were dead in line with the road. They reached the column almost in advance of their own sound, and the first thing that the two R.E.s heard was the rattle, the hailing rattle that started right behind their backs and came up on them in three seconds of raking fire that sent dust spurting up from the road's edge. Then the planes—three, four of them—were climbing steeply into the north sky, and the hailing rattle had stopped, and there was only

the screaming of women and the hoarse shouts of men.

Binns gave Mike a glance. They were lying flat on the road, flung there by instinct. The blood was still draining from their faces, because the shock had been delayed. Five seconds ago they had been walking along the road in the morning sunshine, at the head of a refugee column; now they were lying in the dust, with a screaming mob of people behind them, many of them, in these five seconds, brutally bereaved, many of them dying, all of them venting their shock in the way that comes first and easiest, by voicing it.

Binns said, "Come on," and the two of them got to their feet and plunged across the road's edge, dropping down to the flat soaked land that bordered the water-meadows. One of the tethered cows had broken away and was half-charging and half-falling down the slope, one leg dragging behind it and bannering blood, its high strained bellow pitching above the human sounds, the sounds that were diminishing except where a woman still screamed, and would go on screaming until she lost consciousness and let her dead child or dead husband or dead sister fall from her disbelieving arms.

Mike began cursing when the dive-bombers came off the peak of their roll and steadied like a string of darts, seemingly still, poised in the blue, then growing larger, darkening sharply down the perspective of their run towards the scattered litter of men and animals that had been blown from the road and down the slopes on each side, as if by the wind of the first attack. And then the air solidified again with the planes' sound, and the guns began again, a bone-hard rattling of sticks across a resonant drum. Somewhere amid this mechanical din there was rising the human sound, as of men crying against a wind in the wilderness; and this soft wail persisted, drifting in the air as the planes climbed, and, after minutes, were gone.

Binns was lying prone on his stomach, with his feet together, arms under his face, tin-hat sloped forward across his head. After a long time, he said to Mike:

"We'd better get moving. They were dive-bombers, and they didn't use their bombs. So they've got orders not to break up the road. Means Jerry's coming. Transport."

Mike got up slowly. His face was bright with sweat; it looked like the face of a drowned man, except for the eyes.

"Jesus," he said, "how can you think of things like that, at a time like this?"

He stood wiping his face. Sweat had run into his eyes and they were stinging. Binns said, "You've got to think, or you don't know what to do next. Come on."

Mike went with him, up the slope to the road, and looked back along it, shielding his eyes from the sun. On the road, it looked as if a lorry had come this way, dropping off bundles from a shifting load. Only a few of the nearest bundles looked human, where a face was turned in this direction, or an arm was flung out. The bright sun glinted across a mottle of blood, near the barrow that Mike had been helping to push; the thin man lay hooked over one of the jutting handles, a scarecrow guarding junk.

"We could help some of 'em," Mike said.

"We can, if we can find our mob and get started again. Come on, step it out."

Binns's shoulder-blade ached badly, and he was angry. He didn't like being away from home, from his unit, and he didn't like being shot at without a chance of doing more than to lift a 1914-model Enfield, poking a stick at a tiger. He didn't like the thing that he'd come away from, leaving it with its eyes glazed and its mouth hanging open, Dave Bellman, carrion in a ditch. He wanted to stop running away and hiding and lying on the ground like a rag doll in a dog-fight.

Mike walked beside him along the straight, empty road, and after a time they could no longer hear the crazed chirruping voices of the refugees behind them. The sunshine was warm against their backs; a spread of wind from across the water-meadows cooled their faces; and there was silence except for their own boots on the road. Their rifle-butts clashed together as they walked side by side, and Mike said:

"What's up with your left hand, then?" Binns's rifle was still slung on the right.

"Nothing." Binns looked straight ahead. They'd done nothing, the bastards. They'd not even managed to graze his

hand or bruise his shoulder-blade, for all their bombs and grenades and Focke-Wulfs. They'd done nothing to him. They were a useless shower, when it came to the push. They could do nothing to him, until they got him down on the ground with his heart ripped out. Then he'd give them best.

The road was very long, and very straight. They were two small figures, one tall, one short, moving in step. To the east and west there lay flat country. There was nothing else in this isolated little desert of the world, except the stricken rabble behind, which they could no longer hear, and the spasmodic pulsing of heavy guns to the north-west, which they could not see. The four vultures had gone.

They had reached a knoll of trees by the time their isolation was broken. Mike said suddenly, "Christ, look out!" and they ducked down among undergrowth, listening. In a minute Binns said:

"That's not machine-gun fire."

"No. It's a bike. Motor-bike."

"All right," Binns said. "Get set-up."

They chose a loose earth bank, shaggy with brambles. They could lie on their stomachs here, and use the top of the bank as a rest, and get a perfect bead on the road; and the brambles were enough to cover them. They settled down with luxurious lack of haste, legs angled out, forearms braced comfortably along the slope of the earth, safety-catches off. The sound of the motor-cycle was loudening gradually, but they could not see it yet.

After two minutes, Mike said, "Almost unsporting, ain' it?"

"I'm not out for sport."

They saw the machine now, a dark blob in the middle of the road, a beetle crawling along a ruler.

Mike said, "It might be a Frenchie. Bloody refugee."

"There'll be plenty of time to make sure."

"What makes you think it's Jerry?"

"I don't think. I'm just hoping to Christ."

Mike looked at him. It was not often that old Tubby swore, or blasphemed. When he did, it was important; it sounded like the worst oath in the world.

"I think I'm going to leave it to you," said Mike.

“What?”

“To pick him off. I wouldn’t like spoiling your fun.”

Binns said sharply, **“I’m not going to get any fun. We were given these things to use, weren’t we? You use yours, an’ I’ll use mine, that’s all. We might not get another chance, not both of us. Dave never got one at all.”**

It was the first time either of them had mentioned Bellman’s name since they had spoken those few words about him under the bridge.

Mike said, **“All right, then, my cock-o. Double dose.”**

In the trees above them birds sang. It was a spring day, and the woodland was alive with small things, leaf and bloom and bird. Only the pulsing bark of the engine was out of context, as it neared, loudening. In a little while Binns said, **“Uniform.”**

“Ye’.”

The sun sparkled on metal, on the metal of the machine and on the accoutrements of the rider. He was coming as fast as he could over the patchy road. A thin scarf of dust swirled behind him. He swerved in a wide curve, avoiding a pot-hole, and then came abreast of the first trees, and Binns said:

“He’s British.”

“Well, for——”

“He’s a D.R. Quick!”

Brambles ripped at their khaki as they bundled up the slope and cleared the verge of grass, and stood in the roadway, rifles aloft in one hand. As the rider saw them coming out of cover he braked hard and slewed the bike half round, one hand going down to his holster; then he revved up and came on again with a burst of acceleration in low gear.

When he stopped, throwing his legs out and pushing his goggles back, Binns said, **“Where’s our line, chum? We’ve lost touch.”**

The man looked at them hard. Since the 10th he had ridden through more fifth-columnists than there were bullets in his ammo-belt.

“What are you from, Corp?”

“Twenty-fifth Field Company R.E.s. Sixth. They cleared off this side of Rocquefaux, and we got left behind.”

The D.R. said, "Too true you did. They're twenty mile north, near at the coast." He sat thinking, keeping his engine revving with a flick of the twist-grip. Then he said, "There's a Survey Battery, bit north of here—you better get in with them, hadn't you?"

"That'd be a start," Binns said. Mike was glowering at the D.R. He said:

"What's our lot doing up at the bloody coast, mate?"

The man widened his eyes, making creases in the dust-film on his face. "You want to read the papers, don't you? Not only your lot up there—everyone is. Got a big flap on—di'n't you know?"

Binns said sharply, "You mean a general retreat?"

"You could call it that, Corp. I'd call it a rout. Look, you better get on this, eh?"

Binns stood staring at him.

"You mean both of us?" Mike said.

Binns said to the D.R., "You don't mean the whole of the B.E.F., for God's sake?"

"That's it. The lot. Look, I can't hang about, I only just got this far with me arse in one piece as it is. You gettin' on, or not?"

He shifted forward in the saddle and said, "You first, Lofty, one rifle one side, the other t'other. Take you as far as the cross-roads a few mile up, then you can find your way."

The motor-cycle cocked over a bit and then they settled down. The D.R. jerked his head round to squint at the rear tyre. "Near enough on the flippin' rim." He sucked in his breath. "Ne' mind, she's air-conditioned. You right?"

They swayed badly, getting away, but once in high gear it was easy. Mike half-turned his head and said, "Okay, Tubby?"

"Yes." The answer was whirled away in the dust. The whole lot. It couldn't be. Not the lot. Not the whole of the B.E.F. He sat like a sack, the pain in his shoulder throbbing as they took the bumps.

They had run into thickly-wooded country, diving through avenues of chestnuts, following a road pooled with shadows

and leafy light, rounding the butt of a long-spined hill that tailed off towards Lavallepont. The machine slowed, nearing cross-roads, bringing Corporal Binns out of his cheerless ruminations. When the despatch-rider pulled up, balancing the machine with his feet spread wide, he tugged out his map and showed it to Binns, poking his finger to sketch out the terrain.

"I'm goin' straight on, through Falise to Cars. If I'm lucky. You want'er get down here, follow that road north, then branch off left past the first farm. 'Bout three or four mile, see? If the Survey Battery hasn't cleared out, you'll trip right over it, easy, soon as you're past the farm. Right?"

Binns and Mike got off the machine.

Mike said, "Thanks, chum. See you in the Stalag, eh?"

The D.R. grinned. "Over Charlie's dead body, mate."

He gunned his engine and went away, clouding them with dust. Binns was already stepping it out, and Mike caught up with him. Binns said without turning his head, "What Stalag?" He said it through his teeth.

"Christ, I was only kidding, what's the matter with you?"

Binns walked steadily, looking straight in front of him. His shoulder was giving him jip. "Listen, Mike. We did our training, Chatham; then we came over here and stood about picking our nails for three months. Then there was the 10th, and we had a bit of action. Fortnight later the whole of the B.E.F.'s slinging its hook—according to that bloke."

Mike kept his stride short, in step with Binns; and it wasn't easy. Binns was such a little puck-o. Mike said:

"Well, don't let it get on your tits."

"Doesn't it get on yours?"

"Listen, we're not cutting and running just because we've not got the guts to stand up and fight. Ask me, I'd say it's because we've not got the equipment. Look at this bloody beanstalk—1914 job, wouldn't pick a flea off the end of your nose. There's no tanks, no heavy guns——"

"Well, surely we can dig in on this side till they send the stuff across?"

"Well, you must have a word with the generals. It might

not've occurred to them." He was getting a bit fed-up with all this worrying. He said, "I've got quite enough to do, finding me unit and askin' for orders, without trying to reorganise the whole bloody war."

They stopped talking. They wanted their breath, they wanted to keep the peace in the middle of this cocked-up war, they wanted their mates; and the D.R. had said "Just past the first farm, turn left." So they walked, and said nothing more about it.

The farm was deserted. The sunshine beat down on mellow walls and the tall bleached posts of the gates. A chicken scratched in the ditch, fluttering about like a piece of paper lost at the edge of a whirlwind. They turned along the narrow track, walking below poplars; and then, in less than half a mile, they came up to barbed-wire blocking the lane. Deeper in the trees they could see the shapes of trucks, strung out in ranks; and there were voices, English voices.

A bombardier was on guard with a couple of men. They looked at the two R.E.s closely as they came up. For the first time Binns and Mike realised what they looked like: their battle-dress was ripped at the shoulders and the knees; mud still clung to them, mud from the bombing attack on the trucks, from the ditch where Bellman had died, from the soaked earth of the water-meadows; Binns's wound had opened afresh and the blood had dried on his hand; their faces were masked by stubble and dust that had clung to sweat; their eyes were red-rimmed from tension, sunlight and the loss of sleep.

The bombardier of the guard told Binns they could come through. "Better report to Sergeant-major Leech—he's just gone down through that gate."

Mike started off with Binns. "Come on, then, my puck-o, we're home, or as good as."

They went through the gate and down the earth steps. There were sounds in the air that they had come to love, in the way one comes to love a familiar thing, especially after being cut off from it: the sound of a Cockney laugh, a Taffy's voice; the rattle of pots in a cook-house, the low juddering of a truck as it backed into position with the tailboard banging down; the

cheerful brass-voiced shout, "Come on then, let's 'ave yer!" as the men jumped on board at the double.

Even Binns felt better. This was home, or as good as.

They saw the sergeant-major going quickly towards a hut, and Mike shouted "Sar'major!" as he might have called out to his own long-lost father. They ran towards him at a shambling trot, reaching him as he turned and stood with his hands on his hips, head tilting back an inch to scan them, eyes narrowed against the sun.

Binns began speaking, but the sergeant-major said:

"You'll come to attention."

They drew their feet together.

"Corporal, get a hold of that rifle. You left-handed?"

Binns moved his rifle. Pain seared across his shoulder-blade.

"Now then, what d'you think you are?"

THREE

THE new khaki chafed the corporal's neck. The sun was in his eyes. Through the open window of the hut the sound came of a blower-stove roaring, not far away. Two or three times a shudder came into the air, from heavy artillery fire. He kept to attention.

The adjutant's desk was a stack of empty ammo-boxes with a board across it, draped with faded green baize. He made a note.

"Corporal Binns."

"Sir."

B.S.M. Leech stood near the door, at ease.

"Unit?"

"Three Section, Twenty-fifth Field Company, R.E., Sixth, sir."

"How did you lose contact?"

"I was on parachute-patrol, sir, with two men, the night before last. When we got back, the unit had moved off, sir."

"Where was it?"

"About fifteen miles north of Rocquetaux, sir, near the Chambisse-Goudes road."

"Where have you been since?"

"Trying to re-establish contact, sir."

"Yes, of course." For the first time the captain looked up. A round, young face, eyes trying to look hard, failing. Twenty-three or twenty-four. Not a seasoned soldier. "But where did you go, in the last two days?"

"We went south, sir. I'd seen a village, and transports moving. We got there by nightfall. It was deserted, sir. We slept in a farm-house." He went on from there.

The adjutant looked down at his papers again, listening until Binns had finished; then he glanced across to B.S.M. Leech.

"You have these other two men outside?"

Boots banged together. "One of them, sir. Sapper Russell."

The adjutant swung his eyes to Binns.

"Where's the other one, Corporal?"

"He was killed, sir."

Beyond the open window, the pressure-stove roared. A man had begun singing, farther away, his voice floating rough and musical among the trees.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"Sir." He'd get no other answer.

"When was this?"

"When we were getting clear of the enemy, sir, from the farm-house."

"What was his name?"

"Bellman, sir."

"Where did you leave him?"

The man's voice floated, idly in the sunshine, a lament turned dutiful by too many years.

"In the ditch, sir."

The young captain watched his fingers, rolling the pencil on the faded baize.

"You were still being fired on?"

"Yes, sir."

"You and this other man——" he glanced at the B.S.M.

The boots banged. "Russell, sir."

"You and Russell weren't hit?"

"No, sir."

"Bellman was killed outright?"

"Yes, sir. Excuse me, sir—I've got his papers."

"Let me have them."

Binns put the wallet and the watch on the desk.

"What's this?"

"His watch, sir. He thought a lot of it. He's got a son, sir."

The adjutant opened the wallet and looked briefly at the contents. Papers; a letter, photographs—Binns caught an upside-down glimpse of a woman in a summer dress, smiling. He thought: It's nearly summer again.

The adjutant put the wallet and the watch on one side, and picked up the field telephone as it buzzed. He spoke into it.

"Adjutant."

Binns looked straight ahead of him, through the window.

Leaves, pale-green, dipping in the sunshine. A forage-cap hanging on a nail, like a great brown seed-pod. A man pulling guy-ropes slack, his mate heaving the pegs up.

The adjutant said into the telephone, "Yes, sir. I will, sir." He put down the receiver, and said to Binns, "Wait outside, Corporal."

When the door of the hut had closed, the captain said to Leech, "We've got a time: fourteen hundred hours."

"Yes, sir."

"We're on top line?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, you can check up all round."

"Sir." The boots banged, turned, took a pace.

"Sar'major——"

"Sir?"

"What sort of shape are these two men in?"

"Not too bad, sir, but the corporal's hurt his shoulder. They both want food and sleep, sir."

"That's why you didn't pick him up on his salute."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, send them both in, and you can get on."

"Sir." The boots banged. The door opened. On a diminished tone, "Both of you. Smartly now!"

Corporal Binns and Sapper Russell stood in front of the adjutant. The door had shut.

"At ease. Corporal, what's wrong with your shoulder?"

"Needs embrocation, sir."

"What happened to it?"

"Shrapnel, sir. Only bruised."

"I asked you if either of you had been hit, didn't I?"

"Sir."

"Next time, answer properly. That's not your body, it's a fighting-machine. The medical officer's the one to say whether it needs embrocation or something more. He's the mechanic, not you."

Russell stood looking through the window, biting his lip not to smile. This was home, or as good as. This kid with the pips could do with a woman, or something.

The adjutant stood up, straightening his belt.

"We've got an odds-and-sods department here, under the kindly wing of Battery Sergeant-major Leech. You'll report back to him when you leave here. Corporal, you'll ask his immediate permission to see the M.O. That's all."

"Excuse me, sir."

"Well?"

"Is it true the B.E.F.'s withdrawing to the coast, sir?"

The captain put his hands behind his back and looked hard at Corporal Binns. Russell just managed to keep his gaze through the window, an inch past the adjutant's head.

"Truth one minute's a lie the next, Corporal. But, for your information, this unit is pulling out at fourteen hundred hours. That's in ninety minutes' time, so you'd better get a move on." He half-turned to the window, and said quickly, as if to get it over with, "I'm glad you two managed to reach here, even if the other man didn't. I'll do what I can about the wrist-watch."

"Thank you, sir."

Outside, Russell said, "Pleasant little bastard, i'n't he?"

"He's all right, he just had another couple of toys to play soldiers with."

They walked down to the belt of trees, looking for B.S.M. Leech. Russell said, "I s'ppose Leech is all right, too? Mouth like a red-hot gun-slit."

"Well, we're under his 'kindly wing', so we'll just have to make the best of it."

"Christ, I'd sooner bed down on a snake's-nest."

They found Leech organising a gang round a truck. They stood waiting while he rounded off his orders. He saw them as he swung round, and Binns said, "Reporting to you, Sir."

He checked their stance with a quick up-and-down.

"Stand easy. Corporal, report to the M.O. Sick bay's that thing at the end of the line, looking like a chicken-run. You've not got long because we're just goin' to pull it down. Russell, get to the cook-house and stick into something, quick, before they pack up the grub. Draw rations for the corporal and let 'im have 'em when the M.O.'s finished with him. You can both get some kip on the truck, later—we're

moving off at fourteen hundred hours, so if you get left behind again, God help you.”

The barbed-wire was down, tangled at each side of the lane, already rusting, soon to blend in with the russet red of the briars where it lay. Along the lane the dust had settled, minutes ago. Among the trees the echoes had died away. The chicken was gone from the ditch and was halfway across a field, scratching, picking its feckless way, its feathers at sixes and sevens with a gusty breeze.

The convoy was going north, twenty-five miles per hour, ten vehicles per mile. Binns and Russell sat in a truck, snatching sleep. Sometimes, the shudder of gunfire grew louder than the sound of wheels and engines, but they did not wake. They slept for half an hour before Russell's head jerked up and he let out an oath left over from a dream. Binns opened his eyes and said:

“What's up?”

“I dunno.” Russell looked blearily round at the other men in the truck. One of them said:

“Coupler D.R.s gone by.”

“Eh?”

“Coupler motor-bikes.”

“Oh.”

In less than a minute the truck began slowing; then it stopped, keeping its distance from the next ahead. The engine idled. In the partial silence the gunfire sounded very near. It was almost continuous. The man who had told Russell about the motor-bikes said:

“We've run into some crap, by the sound o' things.”

He was a thin, brown-faced man with bright bird's eyes and white teeth. He said it with a faint grin. His name was Harper. Binns liked him. In this truck they were all in the O-and-S department, under the kindly wing of Leech; of them all, Binns liked this man Harper the best; he had alert eyes and he spoke with a light, dry deftness that both expressed and invited confidence. He was an ack-ack man, a remnant of his unit, cast up on this little shore with his mates Cooper, Whiting and Mills.

Whiting said, "You're cheerful, you are."

"Can't go full-speed up a creek," Harper grinned, "an' not run into crap."

Mills, a stocky little runt with a monkey's energy, was clambering over the legs of the others to the back of the truck. He poked his head round the canvas, looking along the line of the convoy. A murmur came as he called out:

"It's like Brock's Benefit, up there. This looks like our lot."

A few others got up and craned round the canvas.

The line of vehicles was stationary, petrified to neat brown blocks of stone stretching with graveyard precision to a hill of trees on the horizon. The pulsing of the gunfire came in waves past the truck, drumming inside the canvas. Whiting said, "Christ . . ." with his mouth thick. He stared at the roadway behind. Binns looked at him, sorry for him. Whiting was dying another of his thousand deaths along the road to the war's end.

Another sound crept into the background of the guns, and Mills jerked his pert head into the air, squinting against the sun.

"That's 'ealthy, then."

Two spotter-planes were nosing across from the enemy lines to the south-east; they came as slowly as hawks, crossing the convoy and turning, coming back. Their sound was lost, sometimes, in a sudden storm of gunfire that beat like a drum, drowning the cello-strings of the planes' sound; and Whiting found Binns watching him, and looked away again.

From the back of the truck, Harper drew his head in and said, "Position is, gents, that we can't go any farther without fetching a fourp'ny one, and we can't stay here much longer because those little bleeders up there are goin' to fetch their mates. We're sitters." He lit a cigarette and winked at Russell. "Still, the sun's nice, for this time o' the year."

"Shut it up, can't you?" said Whiting.

Little Mills jumped down into the roadway. The road was as straight as a railway, running across land flat as a dish. There was no cover anywhere, between here and the

trees on the north horizon. The trucks were going to be the only cover, if you could give that name to the sitting target of a raid.

Mills cried, "My kingdom for an 'orse!" He had said it at intervals for months. Harper and Whiting were used to it. Mills had been a jockey before the war. He stood in the roadway with his bowed legs apart, left hand on his hip, right hand holding a whip that you could almost see, so typical was his stance. Before the war he had lived for horses, and one day hoped to die for horses; and they'd put him on wheels. He was as fond of wheels as a duck is fond of drought.

Sergeant Bott stuck his head round from the cab.

"Get back in there, Mills!"

Mills turned round and stood behind the truck, where the sergeant couldn't see him. The spotter-planes had dwindled to flecks in the blue. "Now we shan't be long," he said cheerfully. His face was puckered with the worry of the gunfire, and the worry of having to be cheerful.

The convoy remained at a standstill.

"Why the hell don't we go?" Whiting again.

"Where to, chum?" Harper said.

"Out of this lot. Anywhere."

Russell took a pull on Binns's cigarette and passed it back and said, "P'r'aps there's nowhere to go."

"Well, what've we stopped for?"

"Suppose the D.R.s 've brought fresh orders." He looked at Binns and said quietly, "How's the shoulder, Tubby?"

"Fine. Fine." By what he had called a 'strange coincidence' the M.O. had prescribed embrocation. His shoulder was burning with it now, and he was getting sick of the smell, but it didn't ache any more, it just felt hot. He took a last pull on the cigarette and gave it to Russell. "All yours, Mike." He folded his arms, looking through the square gap at the rear of the truck. He didn't feel happy, didn't feel unhappy; he felt neither hopeful nor hopeless, nervous nor calm—except perhaps for a kind of calmness that was a mixture of philosophy and disinterest. He didn't think they'd outrun Dave Bellman very far. In the past thirty minutes the convoy had probably driven

along the last clear road in the north of France, and would not find another one.

They were trapped between a barrage ahead and the threat of a raid from above. Jerry's transport would be along this road soon from the south or the east or the west; because the B.E.F. was on the run, and the Hun wouldn't lag behind. It was going to be a pity, because this whole caravan of men had fought hard, in one quarter or another, since the 10th. The O-and-S boys had come in from every point of the compass, battle-stragglers who had lost touch, lost their mates, their officers, nearly their lives. They were here now, ready to go on and do it again; but there wouldn't be much chance, in a trap like this.

Whiting said, "Why don't we get out?"

Harper said, "What for?"

"Cut an' run,"

"Where to?"

"Anywhere's better than here, isn't it?"

Mills called from the roadway, "'Asn't no one got a perishin' mouth-organ or somethin'?"

"What d'you wanner play us, Milly—the Dead March?"

"Turn it up, will you, chum? It ain't funny."

"Garn, yer windy!"

"Who's windy?"

Binns said loudly, "We all are. We'd be clods if we weren't. But we can shut up about it."

The voice of Sergeant Bott came through the canvas, "All right, keep it quiet in there!"

In the cab, Bott looked at his driver.

"I'm going to take a dekko, 'long the line. If we start moving, pick me up."

He got down, going round to the back of the truck. Mills had heard the cab-door slam, and he was half-way across the tailboard as the sergeant came round. He gave Mills a stinger across the rump with the flat of his hand, and a round of laughter went up.

Bott shouted, "Pipe down, you stupid shower!" The laughter died in its tracks. "Mills, when I give an order I want

it obeyed. When I tell you to get back in the truck I don't want to come round here and find you hangin' like a bat with your arse in my face." He shouted down a fresh chorus of mirth. "Now listen to me, the lot of you! I'm going to see what's happenin', in front. While I'm gone, nobody gets out o' this truck. You don't talk loud, you don't sing, you don't whistle. If planes come over, nip out quick and scatter across them fields, spacin' out as much as you can. If Jerry comes up the road, nip out an' run ahead to the front of the convoy, back o' the guns. Corporal Binns, I'm leaving you in charge."

He went round the truck and began walking along the road. He was a small man, not unlike Binns: compact, quick-moving, a bundling man. He looked smaller still, to the driver who watched him through the windscreen, as he went along the road. From here, he was the only moving thing, a dwarf, a sexton inspecting the spaced-out line of tombstones. Once or twice he turned his head to look at the horizon, south-east where the spotters had come from and returned to.

He reached the next truck, a tenth of a mile ahead. The men watched him coming, four of them hanging over the tailboard.

"She make you get out an' walk, Sarge?"

"Tired o' waitin', Sarge?"

"Sarge, wha'sser score?"

Sergeant Bott walked at a regulation pace, looking once at the men, going past them to the cab without a word. In the cab was a corporal and an M.T. driver. He called up:

"You in charge, Bombardier?"

"Ay, Sar'nt."

"If we get a raid on, tell your men to scatter across the fields. If Jerry comes up the road from behind, tell 'em to scarper up the front o' the convoy, be'ind the guns. Meantime, no noise, an' no singing."

"Okay, Sar'nt."

Bott walked on. He was about halfway between the two trucks when he heard one of the motor-cycles. It was coming back, stopping at the truck ahead, then coming on again. When it reached the sergeant he said to the despatch-rider:

"What's happenin'?"

"Movin' off, Sarge. We're goin' to try gettin' as far as that wood. Jerry's got a gun column comin' in on the Frise-Lonaille road, west. We can't go east because there's the main road full o' refugees——"

"What's convoy orders?"

"No change, Sarge, 'cep' close up when you near the wood."

Bott nodded, and turned back as the D.R. let in the clutch and bulleted off. Try to get to the wood. He knew what they'd do there, and all. Dump the lot. Fester Jerry, fester him. Run and dump, and him right up your jacksie with a gun.

He walked as smartly as he could; it was smarter than he felt. There was a hole right through everything. Whatever you found or did, or thought of doing, there was a hole in it, before you got started. Right through France, right through the B.E.F., right through your bloody heart.

He stopped at the first truck.

"You got word from that D.R., Bombardier?"

"Ay, Sar'nt."

They heard the truck ahead grating its gears and moving off. Bott nodded and walked back along the road as this one started up. Exhaust-gas tainted the air. Long before he reached his own truck it was moving, and he stood by the roadside, waiting. In a little while the D.R. came back from the tail of the convoy, giving him a half-salute as he passed. He began feeling better. Twenty or so vehicles were on the move again; they were running into a dead-end, but where there was movement there was life. In however abortive a way, this was action. It was better than sitting there in the cab, doing nothing but wait for the bombers to come or for Jerry to drive up behind.

His truck slowed. He put one hand on the grip, one foot on the step, and swung up as his driver said, "Hey, Sarge, look out!"

The driver's head was bent; he was looking upwards through the windscreen. Bott looked that way too and saw the squadron. It was coming out of the south-east, not very high

but very fast. Day-bombers, Heinkels. This bit of road was the end of their bee-line, but they were coming diagonally and they'd take their time turning, first. Sergeant Bott said, "Get out, across the fields." He swung down and shouted, "All out!" as he ran to the back of the truck.

The first two men were out, and whipping the pins out of the tailboard rings. It came down with a bang.

"Come on, let's have you, quick!"

Russell took Binns's rifle while he jumped down. Whiting came tumbling out with Harper. Mills's voice floated back from his scuttling figure: he wished to Gawd he'd got an 'orse. Sergeant Bott stood between the truck and the road's edge, watching the Heinkels. They were turning now, sloped in a rack against the sky, pivoting on the wing-man and then straightening in single line directly above the road. They would start at the head of the convoy, blocking the road and taking their time with the trucks. Bott could see men running down to the fields from the truck ahead.

"Come on, then—an' scatter out wide, see? No two men together—all on your own an' scatter out wide!"

The road trembled as a barrage hammered across the north horizon, but the noise of the bombers came bursting in against the background rumble; and then they were coming into their run. Up front, a Bofors was banging away. Russell and Binns and Harper went rocking down the grass slope to the flat meadowland in a group, then Russell yelled, "Be seein' you, Tubby!" and he went streaking off on his own, outstripping Harper and Whiting. Whiting was calling to Harper, something about not leaving him, about keeping together, but Harper swerved off and ran hard. The last of the truckload went skating down the slope and Bott followed, bundling fast, reaching the meadow as the first stick of bombs came down two miles north, coughing and bringing up wreckage from the spot where the leading vehicle had been standing a second before.

Mike Russell was three hundred yards across the grass and sweating like a pig. He threw himself down and lay there with his heart banging against the ground. He tried to turn and

point his feet at the road but couldn't manage it: he wanted to watch. He didn't like things getting up behind him. He liked seeing them coming, so that he could duck. He wanted to know what it was, when it came with his number on.

He watched, with his arms up and legs together and his tin hat sloped across his brow. The speed of the twelve Heinkels was enough to awe a man; they were down to less than a thousand feet, strung in a chain. The sound they made was enough to awe a man; it flew into his mouth as he opened it, like a jet of dark water. Then he saw the second stick going down, slow through the air, soot-black in the sunshine, and when it straddled the road there was a welter of earth and stones and metal that went up as if giant tangle-weed were blossoming, streaked yellow with split timber, shot with rose-light and shadowed with smoke; and among it there winked a glitter of sheared metal, diamond-bright, sailing upwards, curving over and falling, turning in the sun.

Russell heard a man shout; it was a shout like an order, sharp and controlled; but he couldn't see who it was. Maybe it was just a man shouting about dying, because some of them hadn't got far across the grass before the first two sticks came down.

There were ten more. It took about five seconds.

Binns was only listening now, with his head well down. He was thinking of Whiting, sorry for Whiting. Every second, the ground quaked, and the blast bellowed, and the air-waves came gusting past his body, fœtid and sulphurous, evil, frightening, the breath of a holocaust, foul in the teeth. He kept on thinking about Whiting.

Two or three people were yelling now, perhaps hit, perhaps afraid, perhaps keeping their sanity by shouting into the whirlwind as if it might shy away. It did not shy away. Harper, lying with his hands cupping his face, had been counting. He had counted twelve, and was trying to believe he was still alive, trying to drag his hands from his face to look, when the last stick hit the road. It was like a hook to the stomach, after the bell had gone, and his breath grunted out of him. He had miscounted, somewhere, and the clock had struck thirteen. He lay

still, waiting, and then could wait no longer without bringing his head up and opening his eyes.

Where the trucks had been, there were a few scattered pyres, burning with a sickly orange light in the sunshine. At intervals, there were gaps in the road: it ran across a low built-up ridge; and flame was pouring down from these gaps. Smoke from petrol and diesel-oil was mounting in thick weaving banners, catching the mischief of an errant breeze, then spreading out, thinning, smudging away the horizon to the west.

Sergeant Bott lay still, watching the planes. They were gone at last, a cluster of dark fish beyond the murky screen of smoke. He was puzzled. Why had they broken up this road, one of the best routes from the south, where Jerry's columns were extending? He turned his head slowly, taking in the scene across the fields. A few men were getting up, just standing and looking lost, wanting orders, the sound of a firm voice. They would do anything. "Jump in the lake!" And they'd jump in the lake—but where was the lake, Sarge, where was it? He thought: sheep. He stood up, brushing his battle-dress down. You had to look smart. There was a hole through everything, but if you tried to look smart, it made the hole seem smaller.

Whiting didn't get up. He was lying a dozen yards from Harper. Harper was on his feet, and when he saw Whiting he walked over to him and said:

"Okay, Fred?"

Whiting did not move. All Harper could see of him, apart from his uniform, was the back of his neck; the skin was a sickly white. Harper bent down and said, "Come on, the party's over. Come on."

Whiting's voice was muffled against the grass:

"Leave me alone."

"Come on, get moving. We're all going——"

"Go, sod you."

Harper looked round quickly. Men were on their feet, all over the field, starting to move north, parallel with the road, their heads turned to their left, watching the ridge of wreckage and flame and smoke. No one was looking this way. Harper

got Whiting by the shoulder and pulled hard. "Come on, for God's sake, you're not hurt!"

Whiting's face was bloodless. He tried to shield it with his hands, muttering to Harper in a thin, high whine that couldn't get the words together; he was trying to say that he'd had enough; he wasn't going on; he was going to lose himself; he'd had enough. It wasn't an act; it was genuine; Harper knew that. He'd been with Whiting since the rookie days. He had been next to him the first time either of them had heard a gun go off. There had been a kind of surprise on Whiting's face, as if the sound had shocked him more than with its mere percussion. He had suddenly heard what war was going to be. And from that moment he had gone rotten, dodging everything he could, reporting sick till the M.O.s threatened to send him up for malingering. But he was a genuine case. He was gun-shy, war-shy, cold in his guts about the whole thing. Harper knew there were some men like that, accepted the fact that Whiting was one of them, and set out to look after him. They couldn't help how they were born; life was tougher for these, and they faced death a thousand times instead of once. And you helped them, because inside they had a flaw; and it might have been you—this gutless quivering mess of nerves might have been you. Thank your God it wasn't, and help them. Because they wished to their God that they were you.

"Come on, up you get." He bent over Whiting.

"Leave me alone, can't you?"

Harper tugged the hands away from the face and brought his own hand across hard, jerking the kid's head sideways and bringing a hiss of pain from the slack mouth. He got a grip on the battle-dress and lugged Whiting to his feet. Then he walked away, taking his time. Whiting would need a minute to look for his things and collect them: puny pride, stunted self-respect, childish courage. They were all small, undergrown things, a pathetic little collection for a full-sized man to face life with; and he would need their feeble strength to face Harper with. Harper went on walking, and when Whiting came up beside him, Harper started talking about the coast—they were all moving up to the coast, he said, and they'd probably be going

home to re-equip and have a bit of leave. He kept talking about home, and leave, swinging the carrot in front of poor old Fred.

Around them, others were walking more quickly, in response to orders that were being shouted from the north edge of the meadow. They moved like men coming home from harvesting; or they looked like that until you could see their faces and their eyes.

Sergeant Bott was rounding up a group, standing like a squat brown pillar with the voice of the Lord's own wrath coming out of it. When he was satisfied, he got them moving in three lines, up to the meadow's edge. Other groups tagged on, until the whole company was drawn up in ragged ranks, facing the officers.

The orders went from the officers to the N.C.O.s, from the N.C.O.s to the men; and the men began marching, spread out in six great lines, three on each flank of the roadway. They marched towards the wood, towards the gunfire in the north.

Russell, a pace behind Corporal Binns, said:

"They know what they're doing?"

"Who?"

"The officers."

"They know as much as we do."

"That's what worries me."

Turning his head to look at Russell, Binns saw the meadowland stretching out behind them. Here and there the flat ground was littered with rubbish: the cab of a truck, a kit-bag, a prone man, a wheel, another man. Four junior N.C.O.s had been detailed off to scout among the litter and find out which of the prone men were dead, and which wounded. Binns faced his front, and saw a group of men coming past with stretchers folded. The M.O. was leading them. They came close by Binns's file, and the M.O. called out, "How's the shoulder, Corporal?"

It took Binns a couple of seconds to realise he was being addressed. He jerked his head round, "Very good, sir!"

He faced front again, surprise still on his face. And for the first time since he and his two men had been lost on parachute-patrol, abandoned, forsaken and left behind, he felt strong

again, strong in his mind and in his faith. Even a sparrow mattered, even now.

They marched on the wood, all of them, close on a thousand men. They reached it by late afternoon, marching with a good will and with their backs to the south, where there was movement they could not see: a transport column filling the Chambisse-Duvace road, a German column from the Fourth Army, coming north.

They came to the trees, Binns, Russell, Whiting, Mills, Harper and close on a thousand more; and the brown merged with the green, as if autumn were falling long before it was due. The late sun shone warmly, on men and leaves.

FOUR

MAJOR PERTWEE was sitting on a shooting-stick, biting into an apple, when the runner came up.

"Sir."

"Yes?"

"There's a small R.A. unit, west edge of this wood, sir."

"Is there, by God?" Pertwee threw half the apple away and stood up. "What've they got?"

"Three medium howitzers, sir."

"They positioned?"

"Just now, sir, just set up."

"Ask Captain Jones to be good enough to see me at once."

"Sir."

Pertwee looked around him while the runner went off. Lower in the trees, almost at the foot of the hill, the men were drawing tea. He could hear them talking, some of them laughing; could hear the ring of mugs as they lined up. It was like listening to a minor miracle, because the Heinkels had come over fast, and there hadn't been much time to do more than get out of those trucks and run. But the cooks had been organising *en route*. Some bright N.C.O.—Bombardier Keith, probably—had realised it wouldn't be an easy joy-ride to the north. The cooks had brewed up; and when they had run, they had run with deliberate impediment, with small urns, billies and pots, anything that would hold the elixir, the liquid gold that would later be needed more than most other things. Now the men were drawing it. The stuff must be stone-cold, unless they'd brought away a blower; but it was tea. With every truck gone to glory and with the dead unburied, there was tea. He listened for a few seconds, hoping someone would think to bring him a mug. And he must see Bombardier Keith, when he could. In a minor but magnificent way, this was devotion to duty, even if the tea was cold, even if there were no more than a hundred mugfuls of it to be had. What were you in the war, Daddy? A cook. Only a cook? I nearly got killed, running

with a can of tea. Couldn't you have run without it, and been quicker? Yes, I suppose I could have; now go to sleep.

Major Pertwee heard the captain coming, and turned.

"Jones, there's an R.A. unit on the west edge of the wood, with three guns. Go and see what the situation is—who they are, where they've come from, where they think Jerry is closest, whether they're going to stick here and fight something out—see if they've got men needing an M.O. Tell them our strength and condition. Condition first-class but no equipment. And what's the commander's name. I'll be here."

Jones said, "Be nice to hear some of our own guns go off."

"They might even let you press the tit. Hurry."

"Yes, sir."

For another minute Pertwee was alone. He looked up into the laced leaves of the trees. There was green and brown and blue: leaves, boughs and the sky, a pattern of ease, uncomplicated, worked out by the good God with a mastery that was almost careless. He let his eyes drink; he felt hope in him, creeping as quietly as sap, bringing strength. The dark fibre beneath his feet was trembling nearly all the time, and when the leaves shivered to the breeze it seemed as if they shivered to the sound of the barrage, north; but the fibre had a sweetness rising, a Devon smell; and those were Surrey leaves; and there was tea, down there; and there were three medium howitzers just set up. If he never got to the coast alive, this had been a moment.

Someone came running up. Gunner Williams.

"Cap'n Straker's compliments, sir——"

"Yes?"

"Enemy mechanised column comin' this way 'long the road from Doovass——"

"Where?"

"Back there, sir, south."

The moment hadn't lasted long, but it was indestructible now, for all time.

"Find the B.S.M. and send him to me. And I want three runners—you'll do for one."

"Sir."

Pertwee climbed the ridge between two columns of beech, finding an open space with a south view. He raised his field-glasses as reluctantly as he would have raised a glass of poison. Three guns weren't going to be much good against attack from two quarters, with the north blocked and the east cut off. But this was a good salient, a hill, a Dorset hill.

Binns was on his knees, holding the mug firmly, tilting it by degrees as the man drank. The man drank with his eyes shut, like a baby at a breast. A trickle of tea went down his chin and Binns stopped tilting until the man got his breath. There was the smell of blood, from under the blanket, and of ether. The M.O. was a hundred yards away, working like a black.

Binns said, "All right?" There was no answer. "Had enough, chum?"

The man's hand tried to come up, to stop Binns taking the mug away. While this mug was here, and he could taste this half-cold bitter unsweetened stuff, he could still believe in everything. Binns said, "All right, you take your time, mate. You finish it. No hurry." He watched the man's face, able to watch it because the eyes were closed. This man's war was over; it was an odd thing to think. When did the war end? Every day, the war ended, in a dug-out or a ditch, a barn, an open field, this wood. You suddenly left it behind, with your equipment, your mates, your left leg. You went home, to the wife, or to God.

Binns took the mug away and the man choked a little, losing the last few drops; then he opened his eyes. They were clear, and the far blue and green of sky and leaves were reflected in them.

"Thanks."

Binns stood up. "All right, wasn't it?"

"Am I bad, Corp?"

"Don't think so. You don't look very bad. The M.O. didn't bother with you much."

Binns went along the line. Russell was talking to a man, squatting on his haunches; his rough bass voice had a bit of a laugh in it, but Binns saw his face was white, shining with sweat. He said, "How's it going, Mike?"

Russell stood up. "Take over a minute, my cock-o." The old familiar 'cock-o', but with a thick mouth clogged with saliva. Binns bent down to talk to the man, and heard Russell dodging into the undergrowth, and then being sick. Binns made himself look at the man, and talk to him; and when he could, he moved on to the next. When Russell came back, Binns said:

"See if there's any more tea." He threw the tin mug across, and Russell went away with it.

Another man who had volunteered for medical duty was Smith. He was working near the M.O., talking to the men who were waiting, to those who were conscious. Smith was a thin-looking kid of twenty-odd, with long, fine hands and quiet movements; he would have looked a queer, except for his face, especially his eyes. He was all of a man, there in the eyes; they were hard blue, nearly slate-blue, and serious. He was black-haired, and the shape of his head was good; it was a very English head. He was helping with the stretchers sometimes, then coming back to talk to the men who needed someone's voice, anyone's voice, in their ears, saying a few words, no matter what words, intoning against the background of the guns, a priest intoning above the rumbling of the gates of hell.

Smith moved steadily, looking certainly more like a priest than a private; and in his attitude, in the way his hands moved, the way his head turned, there was indicated his future: or his intended future. The others were too busy to notice him, and only a few would have been able to analyse this attitude about him. His calmness might have seemed fatalistic: they might have put him down as a fatalist, or an unimaginative man. The truth was that, despite the good work he was doing here, despite his affection for his friends and the discipline of his Army record, he was nearing the end of this particular road: this congested and hideously-perilous road to the coast. As soon as he could, Smith was going to quit. He was not going to quit because he was afraid of going on, or because he had lost faith in even this tumbling shambles of an army. His reason was a disease, whose germ he had picked up in a village called

Laroche. It was one of the most virulent, most pleasant diseases; and his system was such that he was incurable. It was love. It was not moonlight love, body love, sweet music love; it was penetrating and inexorable, because it was barbed, and the harder the other things pulled—obedience, allegiance, duty—the deeper the barb dug. Smith did not think of it in this way, but this is the way it was. He worked then calmly among the trees and the broken men, with the steadfastness of one who knows that it will not be long, that this is just the final tidying-up, that he has already, in his heart, left this place.

"Smith!"

"Sir?"

"That one over there. Be quick."

Smith saw the one, and went over to him, and twisted the knife out of his hand, having to use a lot of force while the man cursed him and tried to bite into the flesh of his hand. Smith said as quietly as he could, because of the others, "Don't be a fool, it's not as bad as that——"

"I'm not goin' back like this——"

"Take it easy——"

"I'm not goin' back like this——"

"Listen, it seems bad now, but it'll feel better——"

"This is my lot—I'm not goin' home like this——"

"Be quiet, you'll upset the others ——"

"I'll be quiet. You can go away, see. Don't you worry about me." Cunning in the clear eyes, and patience, and a kind of triumph, looking up at Smith; because there was nothing Smith or any other bastard could do, because there were other ways than a knife.

"Smith!"

"Sir?"

"That man next."

"I'm not havin' any——"

The M.O. came over to help move him. "Stop that row and behave yourself, or I'll——" He left it. Or he would what? What was the worst thing you could threaten a man with? Death.

Sounds in the wood were different now, after less than half an hour. In the north the barrages had died down, and the ground felt firm again. A few hundred yards away, the guns were still silent, would not open fire until it was certain their position was known, until Jerry knew there were British in the wood. There was not much talking among the men now; when a voice was raised, it was to give an order, make a report. The sunlight, paler now and sending long shadows among the trees, had a fragile quality, as if it could suddenly be switched right off in the next second. The evening air was soft, scented with bluebells and lilies-of-the-valley, pierced only now and then by a bird-call.

Officers and their N.C.O.s were grouped near a clearing, from which they could see both south and west. There were look-out men posted at the hill's foot, north and east. Liaison was working between the Survey and the gun units. Equipment was being cleaned and oiled. No one knew what would happen. Before this, there had only been thankfulness that they were here at all, at least under visual cover, with a bit of tea and time for a cigarette. Now there was inaction, and to a minor extent preparedness: but no one knew for what. Perhaps night would fall, and they could all sleep, in shifts; there might even be time to dig in, make trenches, dug-outs, weapon-pits, ramparts, before their position was discovered and they were shelled to blazes, or driven out by tanks and mown down in the open. Perhaps they would form up into small formations and walk out, try to get north on foot by dark. No one knew. This was the worst: not to know.

Ron Harper, coming across Smith, gave him a cigarette and said, "Seen Whiting?"

"No."

"What d'you think?"

"About what?"

"This."

They turned their heads as they heard the voice of Leech, giving an order, somewhere in the higher trees. Harper said, "About this."

"I don't know. Do you?"

“You don’t sound very interested.”

Smith said, “You can only be interested in something you know something about.”

Harper watched him, half-amused. He knew about Denise. He had been in the barn, half a mile from the village of Laroche, during that month before the real war had begun. It had been a good billet, the barn, once they’d cleared the rats out and made a pet of the owl. There had only been drill and parades, foraging missions and the bath party, and the French were good company, not as they were later. Smith had worked on that old owl, and made it his particular hobby, taking it very seriously for the first week, feeling challenged by the task of building a little bridge between men and a bird. Others had helped, finding mice for the owl—Tosher, they’d named it—and watching Smith, hearing him talk to it with his quiet, cunning voice while it sat up there like a judge on the bench. Once, some clod had come in drunk and upset old Tosher by chucking a mug at him, and old Tosher had come down like a Focke-Wulfe and clawed the fool’s cap off him, going for his face, but missing. It had taken three days for Smithy to get him round again.

Then Smith had chucked it in, just like that. Not because the owl was really eating out of their hands: Smith hadn’t finished the job he’d sworn to do—make old Tosher come on parade with him, perched on his shoulder. It would have been good, that. A lot of the blokes had lost patience with Smithy’s owl, till you reminded them what it’d be like: old Leech looking along the line and his eyes coming out on stalks—‘Smith! What the bloody hell have you got there?’ ‘It’s an owl, Sir.’ ‘I can see it’s a mucking owl, man—get it off!’ ‘It won’t come off, Sir.’ ‘So it won’t come off?’ And they hoped Leech would come and try to get it off. Leech was a violent man, in a steel-eyed, tough-gutted way; and they knew old Tosher didn’t care for violence. Old Tosher was tougher than Leech. And they’d let their minds run on to undreamed delights: Tosher would crap right in the B.S.M’s eye; he’d fly up and then come diving down, like he’d done in the barn, and he’d scarper with Leech’s cap and leave him standing there trying

to take a parade bareheaded, and the adj.'d come round the corner, just then, and see the B.S.M. standing there bald-headed with a faceful of crap, and they'd all curl up o' laughing.

Smith didn't finish the job, though. Two o'clock was Tosher's training-time, every day; and one day Smith had been missing; and when Harper had asked him what about old Tosher, Smith had said, "Oh, old Tosher?" as if he could hardly remember the owl at all. And for the next three weeks, until the 10th, Harper had covered up for Smith a dozen times, when he cut parades, fatigues, even drill once. Then one evening Harper and Whiting and Mills had been coming back from rabbiting, on the other side of the village; and they had seen Denise. Harper could remember Denise, even now. She had been leaning by the gate of the field, one hand lightly touching Smith as he had turned and seen the three of them in the lane. Even now Harper could still see her, just as she had looked then, by the gate, her hand touching him lightly.

Looking at Smith now, in the fragile leaf-light of the wood, he thought again of what it must have been like to be Smith, in those three weeks. But Smith had seldom shown anything, when he had come back, time and again, from Denise. A certain abstractedness, less inclination to talk, sometimes a curtness when he was disturbed from his thoughts—nothing more than that; and only one or two of them, like Harper, had noticed.

Harper said, "She'll wait for you."

Smith's head moved an inch. The eyes were pebble-hard, stone-blue. Harper hadn't talked about it very often. Mills and Whiting had done a bit of chi-yiking, but even that had been half-hearted, because they'd seen Denise, and she wasn't just one of the girls in the village. They'd been envious, jealous of Smith's looks and his ability to choose someone like that. Some of the chi-yiking had been sharp, at the edge of viciousness. Harper had never said much, except to tell Smithy he thought the girl was a smasher.

Smith said, "She won't have to wait long."

"We don't know."

"It's up to me."

"Don't go and be a fool about it, will you?"

"That's up to me, too."

"I know, I . . ." Harper wished he hadn't started this. It wasn't his business; but he knew what Smithy was thinking about, almost all the time. About getting killed. About not being able to go back. About Jerry coming, rolling into Laroche, cock o' the war, raping what was left alive; and if she were alive, she'd be thrown down first, because a Hun would flout an order from Hitler himself for a girl like her.

Harper looked down at his hands and said, "Well, don't go and stick your neck into anything, that's all."

"No," Smith said, "I won't." He drew on the cigarette Harper had given him. "I've not seen Whiting for a long time, I'm afraid."

"Thanks."

Harper left him. Smith wasn't so much on his mind as Whiting. Smith had sense, guts and patience. Whiting was a man who was falling apart, all through these days of his life; he had sense, but no guts, and was too impatient for life and safety to stand much of a chance of keeping either. Smith didn't need looking after; Whiting did. Why Harper should ever have taken it on himself to look after a man like that, he didn't know. One helps a blind man across the road, feeling embarrassed, a little conscience-stricken that one has eyes at all.

Mills was standing half-way up a tree, looking like an elongated sparrow, perched near the main trunk. Two or three men were below, peering up at him.

"Come off it, Milly, you'll get copped."

"Leechy sees yer up there, 'e'll put buckshot in yer arse."

Mills peered through the leaves at the cow. The cow was a couple of hundred yards away, lowing among the saplings below. It had come in from the open land, its udder heavy, swollen with milk. Mills knew it was in pain, and it had made him nervous from the moment they had heard the sound. If he could get down there he could milk her in a jiffy, put her out of her misery and give the boys a swig at the same time. But the

saplings were a narrow island of stems, two hundred yards from the edge of the wood; and the orders were to keep out of sight, not go an inch across open ground.

"Come on, Milly, 'fore you're copped."

Mills called down something crude. He didn't like hearing an animal in pain, any animal. But if that had been a horse down there, he'd have risked it, and crossed the open ground. At the back of his mind he realised that there were two risks: a terrible one, and a small one. Crossing the open ground, he might give away the whole British company, and bring Jerry here; or he might merely be seen by one of his own N.C.O.s and get a stripping. If that had been a horse down there, he would have deceived himself, would have told himself there was no real danger of being seen by Jerry, no terrible risk, but only the small one. And he would have taken the small one, and gone to help the horse. But it was a cow, and cows were not the love of his life; so his reason remained whole, and he let himself perch here and be sorely troubled by the lowing of the beast. This was the most he could do for it. He looked an odd thing, stuck up in the tree, monkey-faced and foul of mouth; and he would not have looked any different if that had been a horse down there, because when a man is in real love his appearance is much the same.

"Come dahn aht of it, Milly, you stupid prat!"

After a time, he climbed down.

Harper went on looking for Whiting, concentrating on the east edge of the trees, where it was quietest. He must find him before dark. Whiting wouldn't stand a dog's chance, once he'd begun running. He couldn't speak more than a few words of French, and even if he got to the French, they'd have nothing to do with him. He'd run right into Jerry, sooner or later; and Harper didn't want to think about a man like that meeting the enemy, being taken prisoner, begging for mercy before they even looked at him. They might think all the British were like this.

Russell was back with Corporal Binns, trying to make the men comfortable as they waited for the M.O., or came out of the anæsthetic afterwards. Major Pertwee had come down to have a look, and saw the good work going on; and although he was glad to see how much equipment the medical staff had brought away with them, he didn't feel about them as he felt about Bombardier Keith and his cooks. Somehow a doctor is expected to salvage his gear, for it seems more important than tea.

Smith was taking a breather, leaning against a tree, watching the sun go down. It was going down in the west, across the waste of green, filling a clouded horizon. The clouds were lying in long gold slices, swimming in the glow. If she were looking upwards now, she would see them, too.

Sergeant Bott was standing with a group of men, standing very erect, respirator boxed on his chest, bayonet at one hip, boots bright. B.S.M. Leech was talking to the adjutant. Voices were low. The light was fading.

The first shell came high, ripping through the tree-tops and bursting on the east edge of the wood. Fifteen seconds passed and then the British howitzers went off at ten-second intervals. The commander's voice was cut off by the noise of the second shell, and he shouted again:

"Bearing one-one-five, range six thousand."

The cases came out, smoking; the levers cocked; the three of them fired almost in unison, with a gigantic rattle that went pummelling among the tree-boles. Pertwee was shouting to Leech, "Get the men spread out!" But the men were already spreading out, crawling through undergrowth and finding hollows, fallen tree-trunks, bushes, some of them calling to their friends as they found cover, wanting to share it; others just creeping in and lying quiet, hoping to keep it to themselves; but there were not many of these.

The shells came in from the west, where the enemy had set up their position during the past quiet hour. Their aim was good.

The shells were coming out of the sunset, curving slowly into the hill, bursting each time nearer the centre. They came in at intervals of a minute. The trees gave good cover, limiting the effective area of damage, but it was not a big wood; it was not more than a pimple of timber, seen from where the enemy gun-position was set up. There were as many men here as there were full-grown trees, so that, if the shelling kept up for longer than an hour, it would carry out a systematic massacre.

It was very bad, waiting during the minute intervals. You did not know. You hoped the next one would not fall here, but you did not know. It was not possible to tell whether they were sending their fire in any kind of line or arc, sweeping the wood and leaving no part of it untouched; it was possible only to wait, and to hope, and to listen for the swish as the next one came thrusting through the air, pattering through the leaves and then bursting and sending the splinters fluting above your head, past your clamped ears, leaving you listening and alive, praying or crying or cursing, but thankful that there was going to be another minute, at least another minute: that was, if you were still you, and not that broken thing over there.

Some men were still active; mostly the N.C.O.s. They ran crouching, doubling through the timber on the east side, leaping over the backs of prone men, looking for an officer, finding him, asking if there were orders.

The young adjutant, Captain Drew, was standing with his back to an oak, facing east, his hands pressed against the bark, white-fingered. B.S.M. Leech found him there, and Drew straightened a little and said, "What do you think, Leech?"

"Haven't got much chance, have we, sir?" The captain's face was yellow and his eyes flickered. He wanted to let his body sag, to hunch it against the tree as a man huddles in a shower; but while Leech was here he could not. Leech stood as upright as one of the trees, and when they heard a shell coming, he half-turned his head, waiting.

"You'd better get down."

"I like to keep movin', sir. I'll see if I can find Major Pertwee, shall I?"

He went off at the double, now knowing where the adjutant

was. He had to know where everyone was, in case someone tried to organise something; then it would be a help, to know where the people were.

Pertwee was up with the group of gunners, watching them work. He envied them; they worked hard, never pausing to think, to realise anything except that the things had to go in at this end and go out at the other, until there were no more, or until a shell came down just here.

When he could find the chance, Pertwee told the R.A. captain, "Unless we can——" and a shell came directly over their heads, shattering a group of beeches at their backs. Pertwee started speaking again as soon as his throat was clear, "Unless we can help you, we'll get out."

The captain repeated orders and the guns fired, recoiling with bland precision; then he looked at Pertwee as if he didn't recognise him and said, "You can't help us. We're staying. You get out."

"All right. Don't forget the——" The gun commander was not listening. It didn't matter. He might forget the mechanised column that was coming in from the south; that wouldn't matter either. With the bows ablaze, the fire in the stern didn't make much difference. Pertwee began going back, clambering along a chalky ridge where the trees were thickest. He tripped on a root and made to save himself, then flopped right down and covered up as a shell ploughed across on his right, exploding by the ridge, deafening him, leaving him winded and half-buried in chalk and riven timber. It was a minute before he got up, and ran smack into Leech. Leech grabbed his shoulders and his voice came against the din of the howitzers, "All right, sir?"

"What? Yes."

They hung together, these two men, in a kind of motionless dance, each staring at the other's face, until Pertwee shook himself like a dog and said, "We're getting out. Tell 'em to make for the north side, and then run."

Leech drew back and saluted, loving this man's face; it was chalk-spattered and the mouth was sucking breath in and out, but it wasn't like the other one, the adjutant's. He left Pertwee,

and went to round up the men, what were left of them. Pertwee ran on, over the top of the ridge and down the south knoll, towards the makeshift clearing-station.

The M.O. was still working. Pertwee came up at a run, then sagged in his tracks, having to steady himself. The M.O. was crimson from the waist down, standing by the rigged trestle, his bare arms moving slowly as he worked on the man in front of him. Three orderlies were standing by, and two more were behind him, waiting by the next stretcher. Blood had soaked into the fibrous earth below the trestle. Two of the orderlies were watching the instrument moving: the third was looking upwards, drawing in deep breaths, his face wet, expressionless. Major Pertwee said:

"What happened to Sinclair?"

The M.O. said in a moment, "Lost him, down there."

"Listen, we're getting out. You'll have to pack up."

The scalpel probed for the shell fragment, jerking slightly as a shell came down, then probing again. The M.O. said, "I've got a lot to do here. Good luck."

Pertwee looked away from the hands and put an edge on his voice, "You're coming with us. Part of the unit. This dump's *kaput*, you can't do any more. Jerry'll patch these up."

When he could, the M.O. said, "You get the fit men out."

"Look, there's no point in staying. You're a fit man yourself—so are these orderlies."

The M.O. put the dressing on, straightened his back and looked round him. "I'd like three of you to stay. The other two can go—and thanks for your help."

The two nearest the trestle got the stretcher and lifted it, moving across and putting it down at the end of the row. Then they came back. The next stretcher was lifted to the table, and the M.O. began working again. Major Pertwee looked at the orderlies. They stood in their tableau, just as before.

Pertwee said, "Come on, then, two of you." He turned away, calling to the volunteers who were talking to the wounded, "Orders are: get out of here on the north side, and run clear. We'll join you later."

They were about a dozen; among them were Binns, Russell

and Smith. None of them moved quickly; a few stood hesitating.

The major called sharply, "Corporal!"

Binns answered and began getting the men away. Pertwee was losing his patience. He couldn't get the wounded out; he couldn't force the M.O.; but just because this place was a shambles the whole bloody war wasn't over, and he had to have men to fight it. "Two orderlies, quick!"

None of them looked in his direction. The M.O. said without looking up, "Tucker and Boyle."

The two orderlies behind him, waiting with the next stretcher, straightened up. They said something to the M.O., but a triple shudder came blasting across from the guns, and Pertwee could only see their mouths moving; then they went doubling up the slope through the trees.

Pertwee followed them. He had wanted to say something to the M.O., but there hadn't been anything he could think of. He could see a line of men darting through the undergrowth, coming up and across from the hill's foot and then vanishing over the ridge. The voice of Sergeant Bott was sounding out as he went tramping through the undergrowth, searching for isolated men, making sure that everyone knew the orders. His call came at regular intervals, a town-crier's voice in the trees; then a shell sang in and burst over to Pertwee's left; and the voice didn't start again.

Down in the circle of oaks, where the size of the trees gave more protection than in most places, the M.O. straightened his back, flexing the stiffness away while the stretcher was taken off. He said:

"We'll want a light of some kind soon. See what you can rig up."

The next stretcher was lowered gently on to the trestle, and his hands moved forward again.

After an hour, the shelling stopped. There was a local silence now, because the three medium howitzers had ceased fire already, and stood useless among a clutter of emptied ammo-crates. Four gunners were still there, resting side by

side under a rough covering of fibre, with their crosses above them, made from broken sticks. One of these was the young commander. The others had gone, after they had fired the last round, spiked the guns and buried their dead.

Towards midnight, a group of marauding Dorniers crossed the wood, and were attracted, and came back, and dropped an accurate stick of bombs; and the gleam of light that had shone steadily since dusk in the protecting circle of oaks went out, and the wood was dark.

FIVE

THEY walked through the dark, six of them. They had run hard at first, breaking from the north edge of the trees and going down the hill's foot, jumping mole-hills and pockets where the chalk had collapsed and become overgrown again; they had run in their hundreds then, coming down from the trees in a brown tide that had flowed wider as it ran, spreading across the ploughed land, thinning. Behind them the wood was shot with orange, minute by minute, as the dull cough of the explosion came and was followed by the rattle of steel stripping timber. And then another. And then another. They had run on, with the air fresh against their faces and the ground soft under foot. It had been still daylight then, and in their hundreds they were perilously exposed until, according to their orders, they went on spreading, so that soon the brown tide had seemed to ebb away, leaving the land mottled over the area north of the wood.

As far as it had been practicable, N.C.O.s had remained in charge of groups. Corporal Binns had been leading a score of men when dark had come down; and then, because many of the groups had touched and intermingled, and because obstacles had split them up again, and because friends were trying to find friends in the dark, Binns lost most of his company, and was left with only five; and these five had stayed together because they had left the wood together. This was one of the countless nuclei that had survived the flux.

They walked through the dark: Corporal Binns, Harper, Russell, Whiting, Mills, Smith. They had stopped, resting for perhaps an hour, and had gone on, coming upon a huddle of buildings that might have been a village, deserted or with an advance contingent of German troops in possession; they did not know; they did not wait to find out; they skirted it, and came north again by the stars and by the fixed light of a fire to the west, where a town was burning. A long time after they had left the wood, they heard planes coming over, and stood

watching them, safe and invisible, and saw the sudden pucker of light in the south. The shape of the wood had risen in the dark, the trees lighted by the explosion of the bombs. Then the wood was invisible again.

They came to a lane now, that ran diagonally across their line of march; and for a little while they went along it, just to feel the ground firm under their boots as a relief from the cloying of ploughed earth and the treacherous unevenness of soft grassland that had ricked Mills's ankle for him and sent Harper headlong, cutting his cheek open.

B.S.M. Leech had been standing at the edge of the wood, as they had run past. "We'll be joinin' up again, when we get to the coast, an' if you're not lookin' smart when I see you next, God help you!" Some of them cursed him under their breath; others thought he was a discipline-drunk old idiot snatching his last chance of bawling the bloody odds; but a few had experienced a change of heart without knowing it was his purpose: so it wasn't a shambles, after all; they had to keep smart; they were joining up again; and these few took faith in this, and, in a small measure, spread it among their friends.

Corporal Binns slowed his step along the lane and called: "We'll have a break."

They halted, and stood looking around them. The fire was bright in the west. It looked like Rocquetaux had looked, like another hundred towns had looked since the 10th. In the morning it would cool, and those who were left alive would pick up what pieces of their lives were left, and the town would live again, a cripple of bricks to shelter survivors; but just now it served as a bearing in the night, a constant more fixed than the stars.

To the north and the east were other lights: the long intermittent flicker of a barrage; a cluster of star-shells falling; a cone-shaped skeleton raised from a ring of searchlight batteries, focused on an unseen flock of planes; the burst of ack-ack pocking the stars, as if the stars were cooling suddenly to red-heat and then going out.

The surface of the lane vibrated, every now and then, to the distant percussion of bombs and the barrage; but, compared

with other nights, this night was quiet, here, where six men stood, part of a third of a million.

Binns sat down on the grass, crooking his legs over the edge of the ditch and tugging his boots off. His feet throbbed; almost he expected to see them glowing in the dark when he got them out of their boots.

Russell said, "Where's the embrocation, my cock-o?"

"It's all right, Mike."

"You find the stuff, and I'll rub it on. You might want to use that little angel's wing."

Binns rummaged for the pot of embrocation. It had been a waxed cardboard pot; when he finally found it, it felt like a crushed chocolate. Russell had reminded him of a tune, something about an angel in clover, but he couldn't remember the tune, only some of the words. He took off his battle-dress blouse and shirt, hunching his right shoulder while Russell rubbed, talking. "I say we ought to carry on from here on our Jack Jones. It's no use gettin' in with a mob again. It's askin' for trouble. Jerry knows where you are, when there's a lot of you." The cheerfulness had gone out of his voice, since the bombing of the trucks. It had been the second time they'd had to lie in the open, waiting to be hit. The first time, they'd been alone, only the three of them. This afternoon they'd been with hundreds; but it made no difference. You might as well be on your own, in this war, till you could get in again with a gun, put a few mines down, throw up a bridge, do something useful.

He rubbed the embrocation in, circling his hand slowly, watching the light on the horizon. The smell of it reminded him of the clearing-station, and the makeshift operating theatre, and the men on the ground. To Russell, the war had always been serious, since the 10th, and he had never taken it lightly; now he had seen death, and he had discovered that death was serious, too. Before, his ideas of death had been simple images: a coffin; flowers; black clothes. But this kind, this hurried haphazard kind, was different. There were no coffins, no flowers, no mourning; it was a brighter, noisier thing, bright with the shine of blood and a bared bone, noisy

with explosive and a man's cry, and no time to mourn before there was another one and then another, until you lost count and began thinking, with the coming of each next bomb or bullet or shell, this one's mine, this one's going to be mine. You got past the old faith, the old feeling that this couldn't happen to you. You got that one wiped off your face.

He used the same words, talking to Binns: My cock-o. My old puck-o. But his voice had lost its cheerfulness. It was growing hard, was growing up.

Binns said, "I don't know if there'll be any other mob to join up with. We shan't have much option." He drew his shirt back when Russell had finished. The shirt was stiff with dried sweat, and he felt humiliated. This was one of the little things you gave up when you went into a war: cleanliness. But it irked, adding an unfamiliar hunger, for soap and water and clean things.

"Better hang on to this stuff," Russell said. "There's only a drop."

Binns remembered something about one of them, one of them tripping and cursing, across a field. He called out, "Who was that bent his ankle, a bit since?"

The wry Cockney voice of Mills came out of the gloom.

"I did! What you got, Corp, a medal?"

Binns said to Russell, "Give him the stuff, will you?"

Russell stood up, looming like a tree in a gale above the other men.

"Where is 'e?" Russell asked.

Mills said, "What you on about, mate?"

Russell located him, and gave him the little pot. "Go sparing, my cock-o, there's only a bit."

"What is it, for Chris' sake?"

"Bloody embrocation!" It was not Russell who said that. It was a voice out of the gloom, a voice full of anger. Mills looked round him, his brows puckering.

"'Oo 'asn't 'ad 'is Eno's this mornin'?" he enquired, mimicking the shocked tones of a mother.

Russell was still standing up. He knew who it was. It was Whiting. Russell said, "What's your trouble, chum?"

There was no answer. In a few moments Binns said:

"Mike."

"Ye'?"

"Come on."

Mills said, "Thanks, Corp."

"You're welcome."

Russell sat down beside Binns, dangling his long legs into the ditch. They began talking about the coast, how they would get to the coast, and what they would find there. A short way along the ditch, Harper murmured quietly:

"Don't start getting people's back up. You're enough of a bloody nuisance as it is."

Whiting said nothing. There was nothing to say. He did not even realise why he had called out so angrily just now. It was just that they'd been creating so much, about a drop of bloody embrocation—who bent their ankle? Where's Mills? What is it?—as if it was important, or something, shouting the odds up and down about a little thing like that, when the horizons were smothered in muck wherever you looked, and there wasn't a chance in hell of getting through this lot alive.

He had tried it, in the wood. Running away. He had stood by the east knoll, staring across the land while the sun went down. He had stood there shivering, perched on the brink, coming to the exquisite torture-point when a man has screwed up his whole nervous system to commit an act, and then tries to move, knowing that if he does, the jelly in his legs will send him over on his face. He had thought of everything that would happen to him if he stayed with the Army, and of everything that would happen if he went off alone. He had viewed these two pictures of the future through a mental stereoscope; but there was no focus, no clear conclusion. On the one hand, massacre under the enemy's guns that were going to drive this lot into the sea; on the other, a few days' freedom from fear of attack, and then a glimpse of a Jerry helmet, the sound of a guttural voice, and then capture, and torture, and death. Only in the last instance were the two pictures in perfect focus: there was death at the end of both.

He had stood at the edge of the trees, clammy with cold, the

sweat drying on his face and prickling his scalp while he tried not to throw up; and each thought that had crept shivering out of his fear-filled imagination went straight to the solar plexus, to ferment there like poisoned food. And then, a little before dark, Harper had found him.

"What the hell are you doing here, Fred?"

"I feel sick."

"Come on, for God's sake, get back with the mob."

"I feel sick."

"Listen: can't you pull yourself together?"

"It's easy for you."

"It's not easy for any of us——"

"You can't see what's goin' to happen——"

"Don't kid yourself. We know, all right."

"Then why don't we all get out of it?"

"Get out of what, you bloody pratt?"

"This bloody war."

"All right, we all get out—we all turn and run, eh? Back the way we've come, the lot of us. Then what?"

"It's better than just——"

"Then what?"

"If we go on like we're goin', we——"

"Oh, balls. You've lost your guts and now you're losing your sense. You don't know what you're saying. If you're so keen on getting out of the war, why don't you? I shan't stop you."

The shadows of the trees crept slowly down the bare foot of the hill, a soft tide as slow as lava, darkening over the minutes.

"Leave me alone."

"I'm taking you back."

"Why don't you leave me alone, sod you?"

"I've been looking for you for the past hour. Now I've found you, I'm either taking you back or I'm goin' to see you do it—run away, and get out of the war. Make up your mind."

Whiting hated Harper, actively and consciously, hated his lean face and bright eyes, the way he stared at you, the way he got at you like a snake with a rabbit, the way he made you feel

even worse than you were, by making so much of looking after you and finding you when all you wanted was a bit of peace. And more than hating Harper, he envied him.

"Come on, Fred. One thing or the other. Come back with me, or run down there. I don't mind which, but you've got to be quick about it."

Whiting tried to answer, half-turning his pale face and trying to slit a word out, his fingers hooking for a physical word out of the air. If there had been a word, one that would have made any sense or put any real argument, he would have found it then, because with great effort one can find the thing one needs, if it is there at all. But there was nothing to say. There was only the hate, and the envy, and the empty air, and Harper watching him.

"Come on, then, quick!"

Something like a sob came out of Whiting, because he had been here alone for longer than an hour, pitting one half of his sickened energy against the other until the little strength in him had been cancelled out, leaving him as he had been before, as he would always be, frightened and sick and lost. And now Harper was here, doing it all over again, goading him; and Whiting gave up, covering his face with his hands, going slack with his back to the tree, choking with tears.

Harper said faintly from the world outside these quivering hands and the cold singing panic of these ears:

"Right. You can't run. You're coming back with me."

It was like struggling under water, with someone shouting from a boat above, very faintly.

"Come on, Fred. Brace up!"

Then his hands were snatched away and he staggered, half-falling, clutching out, trying to hit, as a drowning man hits in his panic when his brain turns and he thinks his rescuer is an enemy; then Harper swung him bodily away from the tree and knocked him down with a blow to the jaw, impelled partly by anger, frustration and disgust, partly by the feeble excuse that he must retaliate when hit, and partly by the knowledge that this would be the quickest and least embarrassing way of making the kid go with him.

"Get up."

The kid didn't move. Harper bent over him, and saw that he was out cold. He picked Whiting up, hooked him across his back, and began walking up the slope.

So Whiting was still here now, sitting at the edge of the ditch, part of a group, part of the war. Listening to a lot of fuss about embrocation, when they were all heading for hell.

Harper said, "Have a fag, it'll make you feel better."

"I haven't got one."

Harper fumbled in his pockets. Next to him, Smith said:

"What have you lost?"

"Fag. Got one?"

Russell's voice lifted. "Who's got the most fags, my jolly puck-os?"

They all rummaged, and Mills said, "Let's 'ave a kitty, share 'em out! I got a few!"

Binns put his tin-hat on the grass, upside down, and they threw their cigarettes in.

"Count 'em, Milly!"

"I can't, my 'and's covered in embrocation."

Russell did the counting. There were fifteen cigarettes.

"Two each, an' three over," he said.

Mills said, "Keep 'em. Stick one be'ind each ear, an' one up yer jacksie, an' call yerself Woodbine Willy."

The cigarettes were shared out, Russell keeping the three spare ones. They all lit up.

"Mind that bloody light!"

"Garn, they're miles away!"

"Keep it down, you clod!"

Their mood changed, charmed by the little drug. Even Whiting, emerging from his sick-heartedness, said to Harper:

"That barrage has given over. Listen."

"Yes."

Mills said suddenly, "'Ere—everythin's give over."

They listened. A light breeze was shifting across the lane, soughing through the briars, fretting a gate-latch farther along. The glow of the burning town was flushing the sky, and to the north the darkness was still peppered with bursting A.A. shells;

but the breeze was southerly, and there was no sound of war. It had been a very long time, for most of these men, since they had been in the open, in peace.

"I don't like it," murmured Russell. "It's unnatural."

"Shuddup."

They sat listening, attentively, as if they listened to music. Their heads turned to watch the sky and the horizons, so that in the gloom their cigarettes moved slowly, small orange spots making patterns in the velvet air, weaving among the humped dark figures of the men.

The voice startled them, "Ho-olee Night . . . Pea-eaceful Night . . . A-all is Calm . . . A-all is Bright——"

"Can it!"

"Sock 'im!"

"Give over, Milly!"

Mills fell silent, leaning back on his elbows.

They listened, for minutes, to the strange music of the silence, smoking their cigarettes. They felt the goodness coming quietly into them, gentle as an anodyne, soothing them, turning their minds away from the past where there had been so much pain and fear and death, turning them away from the future that would be the same. They rested together, borne on the silence, luxuriating in its blessed peace, remembering other still nights when they had been standing in the garden, alone or with someone else, with people other than these, standing and watching the stars with no thought ever of this, ever of war.

The breeze went sifting among the tangle of the hedge, and rattled the gate-latch, every now and then, coming to touch their faces and their hands, coming out of silence and passing them, going into silence beyond, softly beyond the leaves and over the meadows to the north.

This was a moment-long halcyon calm, an islet in time. From all the hundred thousand names of men, drawn from a maze of roads that linked a thousand villages and towns, each road perilous and every town blacked-out or bombed or peopled with sleepless eyes, these very few were here, come here together from the various quarters of hell that housed a war; and nothing could happen, for a while, to change this;

wherever they had been and whatever they had met with, they were here now, together by chance, brothers by right of their situation, friends unto death: for it seemed to them at this time that death would set the seal on all of them.

Corporal Binns turned his head, and was the first to break the silence.

"Mike."

"Ye'?"

"Better be pushing on."

"All right." He had faith in Tubby Binns. He was ready to go with this little puck-o anywhere. "Where to?"

"North. The coast." Binns gathered his things together: rifle, respirator, water-bottle, bayonet. Then he put his boots on. Mills said:

"On with the bleedin' motley, Corp?"

"Yes. What's the ankle like?"

"Eh?"

"Your ankle."

"Ah. All right. 'Ow far are we from the coast, then?"

"Forty or fifty."

"Kilometres?"

"Miles."

"Oh, Chri'."

Harper said, "What about some kip?"

"We'll get some in the morning," Binns said, "if we're lucky. The thing is to go as far as we can by dark, and then duck down somewhere, soon as it's light."

Smith said, "You mean fifty as the crow flies?"

"About that."

"It's a good step."

"Well?"

Whiting said, "We ought to stick here an' lie low. We're in clover, here."

Binns tried to remember the tune, but couldn't. Angels in clover, that was all he remembered. He said:

"If Mills has to go slow, someone help him along. We've got to get as far as we can tonight." He stood up. It would be nice to carry on along the lane, but unless it turned north soon, it

would take them off their course. They could go round all night in circles, that way. He squinted up at the stars, and then took a look at the glow in the west. "When you're fit," he said.

The others got up, their boots scraping on the surface of the lane, where the hard facets of stones reflected the flush of the sky. Mills tried his full weight on his ankle and let out a purple phrase. When they began walking along the lane, one or two started chanting an Army song, and Binns called sharply, and they stopped. In a few minutes they came to the gate where the wind had been fretting the latch.

They climbed over the gate, and dropped on to soft earth. Binns walked ahead with Russell. Mills was with Smith. Harper and Whiting brought up the rear.

"Wherever we go," Binns said, "keep together."

They walked with their backs to the south, to the wind, to the strange sweet moment when there had been silence, and peace, and life in the midst of death. Only the wind followed, and nothing went ahead, except their thoughts.

An hour before dawn they came to a railway line, and climbed the embankment, and walked along the sleepers. Russell and Smith managed well; but the others, especially Binns and Mills, had trouble keeping their stride. It was not dark now. The sleepers were black against the pale stones, and the fragile light, seeping into the sky, glinted along the metals on each side of them. Mills was panting, clearing his throat every now and then, and Smith said:

"I'll have your rifle."

"You bloody won't."

"Come on."

"You got one o' yer own."

"Hold on to me, then."

"You'll wanter carry me, next."

"I'll have to, if you can't keep up."

"I'm keepin' up."

"Yes, and it's killing you. Come on, stop being a hero."

That one narked little Milly, and he swung his rifle to his

left and put his right hand on Smith's shoulder, half-walking and half-hopping over the sleepers.

"It's this flippin' ladder we're on," he said through his teeth. Pain had been shooting up his leg for a long time now, and he was angry with it.

Whiting was telling the corporal they should be getting down under cover before light broke. Russell was telling Whiting to put a sock in it. Harper, whose sight was bird-sharp in any light, said:

"Corp, there's a road, on our right."

They stopped. Someone said, "What's movin'?"

Harper told them, "Refugees. A pack of 'em."

In the pale grey atmosphere, mist was lying in shallows below the embankment; above it, the movement was just visible. Harper could see that there was no precision in the march of heads, and the only sound was of rickety wheels. The untidy hump of a barrow stuck out at ragged intervals along the line. A woman's voice piped clearly, and Smith picked out a word or two.

"We'll keep along here," Binns said. He and Russell had already tried their hand at joining a refugee column.

They went on, parallel with the road; and as the light strengthened they were able to see the size of the column on the far edge of the field. A whole village must be down there, straggling over a half-mile. In the distance were buildings upon which both the railway and the road converged. Beyond them, another road was marked by a line of fires. Binns said, "The Army's been this way."

"What Army?" Russell said it without thinking. It was a long time since he had felt himself to be with organised soldiery.

"The British Army," said Binns, "or the French. Dumped their stuff and left it burning. Civvies wouldn't do that—they leave their stuff at home or put it on their backs."

They reached a fork in the rails, and turned along a siding. The great sheds of a station stood black and solid, silhouetted by the dawn light and the glow of the fires. Binns halted them and looked down at the road. The refugees were moving

steadily; in half an hour the road would be clear, and they could walk along it and make better time than they could across country or over these jolting sleepers.

Whiting said, "Are we goin' to duck down somewhere?"

Binns said, "No, it's not worth it. We can push on, for a bit——"

"I thought we were goin' to lie low and——"

"Stuff it, will you?"

"Let that lot get by, eh?" said Mills. Smith felt his hand trembling on his shoulder, and knew that Mills hoped very much that they could rest.

The corporal said, "Yes, we'll give 'em half an hour."

"Hoo-bloody-ray," murmured Mills, and he took his hand off Smith's shoulder and hopped over the lines, sliding down the embankment and lying spreadeagled at the bottom among a litter of rusty cans. "Call me early, Mother dear, for I'm to be Queen o' the May."

The others came down the slope, and some of the refugees, hearing the clatter of the cans, turned their heads and saw the Tommies. One or two called out, and waved; a woman laughed, and raised a shrill voice. Mills sat upright and shouted:

"An' the same to you, ole ducks!"

Binns said to Smith, "What did he say?"

"Said we look a bit of a shower. Something about a rubbish dump."

Binns said, "Tell her——" and thought better of it.

Smith looked at him and said, "Wouldn't do any good, would it?"

"No." Binns stopped talking for a time. It was true, anyway. She was right. Here they were, the British Army, sitting in the middle of a tin-can dump, their faces dark with stubble and dirt, their uniform torn, their boots thick with muck, their eyes tired and their stomachs empty. The old bitch was right. But they'd been so different before, these Froggies. It had been all 'wondairful Tommee' and 'Briteesh magnifique', and flowers and smiles and kindness, before. The young girls all over them, take your pick; and the men proud, except for the

pro-Jerry groups that kept out of the way. Everything on the house, cognac and café-rhum, Pernod and Dubonnet, nothing too good for Tommee. Now brave Tommee was part of a rubbish-dump, and France was on fire.

Binns thought: You had to look at it this way. Your wife and kids were limping along the road from Chichester to Arundel; and that was East Grinstead, burning over there; and there were German troops looting Bournemouth and Dover and Margate; and all you saw of your foreign allies were a few dirty soldiers, dead-beat on a rubbish-dump; and all you wished was that the lot of them would clear out, German and French alike, clear out of Dorking and Guildford and Reigate, out of Sussex and Surrey and Kent, out of England, clear out and leave it clean.

The woman was right. You had to live with these minor, unimportant injuries: the dirt, the smell, the sneer, the cynical cackling laugh of a woman who was tramping the road with her kids and a few of her belongings, leaving her little house with the flowers just at their best in the garden behind, and the beds not made, and the stove going out, and the front door open, exposing the house to any boots that cared to tramp in there. So Binns, trying to set all this right in his mind, was prepared to put up with the dirt and the smell, because no one could help that; and he could understand the sneer and the cackling laugh, because it reminded him of something worth thinking about: the thought that Margaret wasn't tramping a road, with Jill and Bobbie and a few bundles of food and treasures, away from the little house in Redhill. They were there now, with the door shut and the stove bright; and the tulips looked a treat, down by the garden wall.

"Tubby."

"M'm?"

"What about some grub?"

"Some 'opes," came Mills's voice.

Binns said in a moment, "We'll try the station. Might be something left in the buffet." He got up, with Russell. As they walked away, kicking among the cans, Mills called:

"While yer there, arst 'em what time the nex' train is for Purley."

"Life an' soul o' the party, aren't you." said Whiting.

"Aow, shuddup."

The refugees had gone, somewhere into the morning, in no particular direction, just away from the Boche. Binns was leading his men along a narrow track that cut across the main road, a track that broadened sometimes and led past houses that had long since been deserted. There was no definite sign that they were empty; a house standing four-square among its cedars and larch and laurels, the grass verge of the drive well-trimmed, the flowers in bloom, is not necessarily deserted just because it is silent. But they knew, as they passed these places, that there were only the rats in the cellars and the birds under the eaves, and no other tenant.

Across the fields there was more equipment, burning, flaring up in the small wind and sending smoke towards the north; and in the north there was more smoke, great billows of it flowing away from a group of storage-tanks and smudging out half the buildings of a town. The bombers had gone away fifteen minutes ago, sloping down the sky towards the west; but more were in the air, somewhere: the drone of their engines was a constant that rose and faded but never died away. Puff-balls were floating, five or six miles distant, not very high up, just below the skein of cloud that covered half the north; so the bombers would be above it, trying to get down to the rich earth where there was so much to be destroyed.

Mills was carrying on without Smith's help now. The others had forgotten that Mills had ever walked as they were walking; he had always hopped like this; it had become his personality. He kept up well, saying very little, saving his breath, journeying—in terms of physical effort—twice as far as the rest. He had used the last pathetic smear of embrocation, and had loosened the laces of his right boot, but his foot felt as if it were bursting and on fire. He kept his eyes on the back of the man ahead, and tried not to think what it would be like to stop, and lie down, and shut his eyes; or to reach a stream and sink his foot

into cold water, quenching the pain; or to suffer the bitter delight of saying, You go on; I'm dead-beat; you go on.

They had marched fifteen miles from the wood, mostly across rough ground. They had not slept. They had eaten nothing but the last of their iron rations. The cigarettes were gone: Russell had doled out one to Mills, one to Whiting, one to Binns. The five of them kept along the track, dogged and silent, until Harper said:

"Hey, Corp—where's Russell?"

Binns looked round and stopped.

"Where'd he go?"

"Scarpered," Mills said. He stood propped on his rifle, not worried about Russell, conscious only that the horizon had stopped swinging up and down, that his feet were motionless, and that they had stopped because of someone else and not for him.

Binns said, "Well, didn't anyone see him go?"

"Nipped up there for a crap, maybe," said Harper. They had just come past a fork in the track, where a barn wall gave cover. One of the large houses stood among its trees, fifty yards deep from here.

"Mike!" Binns called. He went back to the fork, and round the corner of the barn. Russell was there, poking about under the bonnet of an enormous saloon car that was cocked sideways across the ditch. "Mike—what're you at?"

Russell jerked his head up and called, "Get the blokes!"

Binns went along the wider track towards the car, and said something to Russell just as he slammed the bonnet down with a bang. He began again:

"Mike, stop arsing about. Once we stop we'll never get on."

"We'll get on all right now, my puck-o. Fetch the blokes."

He climbed into the car, and the self-starter whinnied, cutting out and then whirring again. Binns called out:

"Listen: leave that bloody thing alone and——"

The engine fired and his words were cut off as Russell raced it, clearing the choked cylinders. He stuck his head out of the driving-window and shouted, "Why don't you fetch the blokes?"

Binns shouted back, "You'll never get that thing back on the road——"

"I can if you fetch the——"

"Oh, for God's sake," Binns muttered, and turned round, knocking into Harper, who had come round the barn when he had heard the engine. Binns said, "He's gone off his nut," and then raised his voice, "All right, let's have you!" He shouted two or three times, then turned back to look at Russell. Before the war Russell had been a motor dealer, with a partnership in a breaker's yard. Binns decided to let him play. It was a diversion, and they could rest their feet.

Russell got out of the car and began darting about the ditch, nearer the barn. "Get some o' this stuff—much as you can!" He was collecting an armful of sticks and brushwood, dropping it by the car. Harper was looking at it, listening to the idling engine.

"She's a smasher." He glanced at Binns. "Hispano."

"Yes?" said Binns. He sat down on the grass. It was all going to pieces, suddenly. It had been all right, with their feet moving, and every step another one nearer the coast. Now they'd stopped, and Russell was larking about, and Mills was pulling his boots off, and his shoulder was throbbing, and the French bitch had laughed, and there'd been nothing in the station buffet except broken glass and mice, and nothing on the rubbish-dump except the British Army.

He shut his eyes, and listened to their voices and the sound of the engine.

Mills said, "Are we goin' ter ride in that?"

"We might," Russell said, "if you get off your arse and give a hand."

"He's all right," Smith said. "What've we got to do?"

"Lift the back up, cock-o, an' shove a load of this stuff under the wheels. Then I can get a grip, see?"

They stopped loafing about and began helping. Smith and Harper took a grip on the rear of the car, lifting it on the springs and bouncing it; then they straightened up.

"She weighs a ton, for God's sake."

"And the rest," grunted Russell. "Hey, Tubby, come on, can't you?"

Binns got up. Russell said, "You an' Mills shove the stuff underneath while the rest of us lift her."

They worked for ten minutes, sweating at the rear bumper with their heels dug in and their muscles burning, while Russell shouted, "Hup! Hup! Hup!" as they bounced the great body higher and higher until the wheels came off the ground at intervals, and Mills and Binns pushed the brushwood between the tyres and the wet, smooth clay.

Russell stood back, his chest heaving. He said between gusts of breath, "Now get round the front, on the bumper, an' dig your feet in good'n' hard." He climbed into the driving seat and revved the engine. "You right?" He slid the gears in mesh and shouted, "*Now!*"

The brushwood came flying out, scattering under the belly of the car as the rear wheels span and then bit, slewed sideways and then bit again, getting a grip and pulling the car backwards with a sudden jerk that sent Whiting down on his back and Binns into the bottom of the ditch, while Russell let up a roar of triumph above the high, smooth howl of the engine. He cut the ignition, and clambered out to see if the car was on an even keel.

Binns came up from the ditch and looked at Russell.

"She all right, Mike?"

"'Course she's all right. A bloody flyer!" Russell was grinning like a kid. "Come on, then—get in, my jolly boy-os!"

For a moment they hesitated. Perhaps, even in the midst of a crumbled world where property was just something you remembered, or left behind, or burned and abandoned, they felt a sense of property, and realised that this magnificent car was not theirs, but a stranger's. Or perhaps each man hesitated for a reason of his own: Binns was built for foot-slogging, and had got into the rough, steady rhythm of the march since they had left the wood last night; Harper doubted if they could ever get far, in this Ritzy-looking saloon, without having to abandon it and take to a cross-country route that would be quicker in the end; Smith didn't believe they'd get a hundred yards before they found there was only a drop in the tank, or some other technical snag stopped their ride; Whiting didn't care whether

they walked or went in a car, because they were only heading up there to the north, where the bombers were, and the guns, and the war again.

Mills was the only one who did not hesitate. The thought of going ten paces—even five—without having to put his feet on the ground was fantastic and beautiful in his mind. He jerked the rear door open and pitched in, dropping his rifle on the floor and sinking back into the seat.

"I'ss like bein' in bed—bein' in bloody bed!"

The others followed, overriding their moment of hesitation; and Russell started the engine again. He didn't believe this, not really. After finding this glorious thing, and organising its salvage, he was about to drive it away; and he couldn't believe it. To Mike Russell, of Stacey's Autos, Streatham High, a six-cylinder Hispano-Suiza was like a champion hunter to Mills; and you don't find a thing like this in a ditch, yours for the asking, just when you're ready to drop.

He let in the clutch; it was smoother than silk. The engine was a rush of the wind, spinning in near-silence under the great dark bonnet, with the hiss of the air-intake the loudest sound. The gear slipped through the gate, a hot blade through butter. You didn't drive this thing: you sipped at cream on a summer evening. It was like—it wasn't like anything, anything that you could believe.

Mills sang, "Ro-oll out th' barrel, let's 'ave a bar-rel of fun—"

"Turn it up!" Russell took them round the barn corner with a discreet whisper of tyres. Mills's voice aboard this car was like having a bookmaker at a Brahms symphony.

He changed into third along the narrow track, but could not yet go into top, because of the bends and the bumps. The two-ton machine took the bumps with an ocean-liner's lordly disregard, but if you missed a bend there was a lot of metal to bring back into line, and Russell wasn't ditching this again.

Beside him, Binns said:

"All right, isn't she?"

"Ye'. All right."

The corporal looked through the windscreen, feeling

different, feeling better. It couldn't all go to pieces, when you were riding in the Ritz, cradled in pigskin, furnished with satinwood, drawn by thirty-odd whispering horses.

He turned his head. They had pulled down the two occasional seats at the back; Mills's short body was lying nearly prone on the rear seat as he stretched out his legs; Harper was curled up, boots off and eyes shut. Binns said:

"Get some kip if you can. There might not be another chance." He looked at Russell. "You all right, Mike?"

"In clover, cock-o. You shut your eyes, an' I'll wake you up if anythin' happens."

Binns settled down in the seat, and in a moment shut his eyes. It was odd, going along in a car like this and not knowing when or where you'd stop. It wouldn't be at the races, or Hastings, or a road-house. It'd be in a crater, or a burning village, or at a road-block, somewhere like that. Drive up in style. It was very odd.

They still slept, the five of them, while Russell drove. He drove warily now, his dreams gone. The track had finished at a T-junction, a mile ago, and he had turned left, trying to keep the sun behind them and the silver stork mascot flying north. This road was wider, and metalled, so that the great car was gliding in its stride; but there was a lot of noise now, that came hammering above the rush of the slipstream from somewhere north-west. It was mainly mortar-fire, peppering up from a strong emplacement, firing across their line of route. There was a hill, a mile ahead, and Russell was worried about what he'd see when the Hispano topped the brow. He didn't want to give this beauty up. The bastards'd have to blow her from under him before he'd dump this for scrap.

A cloud of planes, at three- or four-squadron strength, was flying very high, coming in from the north-east or east; from here they looked big enough to be bombers. He kept them in sight for minutes, climbing the long hill and listening to the spasmodic thump of the mortars. A minute ago he had driven past a body on the road, a man in rags, flung out face down, a birdcage lying on its side near-by. What would a man have been

doing, then, alone there with a birdcage? And now there was something else on the road, a shapeless heap of black and red and white; Russell watched it as he neared, and the thing took on curious identities, seeming like a tiny heap of black earth with a huge white lily growing on it, and then like a Dutch girl hunched on the road with her pointed white hat bobbing to the wind.

This second appearance was nearer the truth. They were two nuns, one lying across the other, her face turned in this direction; but as Russell drove slowly past, the wind took the white linen and span it away through the dust, busy as a little windmill; and Russell looked once at the face and looked ahead again, putting his foot down on the throttle pedal, swallowing saliva. Nuns in jackboots, probably misdirecting a British troop and getting shot in the face as they stood there, making a slip and revealing their true business and then dying for it, as they should.

From beside Russell, Binns's voice came.

"What was that?"

"Eh?"

"On the road." Binns had been wakened by the slowing of the car. He peered up at Russell with red eyes.

"Fifth column."

"Oh. How far've we come, Mike?"

"'Bout fifteen or twenty miles, but only half in the right direction, before we got on to this road."

"That's good going." He was grateful to Mike. They'd still be slogging now, with Mills's ankle packing up and all fit to drop. "You'd better let someone else drive, while you get some sleep."

"I'm all right."

They were nearing the hill brow, and Binns said:

"We're goin' to run into something, by the sound of it."

"Ye'. Mortaring."

"Which way?"

"I dunno."

The Hispano flew up the last of the hill and they stared through the windscreen with their eyes aching for news. There

might be anything, beyond this brow. The mortars were thudding away, three or four together and then single, and very loud now: even through the tyres and springs they could feel the vibrations.

A church spire came poking up into the clouds; and the tops of poplars; and a slope of high roofs. Binns said:

"Slow, Mike."

Russell let the momentum die away; the engine was almost silent; the slipstream went fluttering past, singing through the spokes of one of the spare wheels. A group of trees stood just beyond the hill brow, and Binns said:

"Pull up there, for a minute."

"Ye'."

He swung the car into the mouth of a track, where it was bonnet-high with brambles. Then he switched off the engine. Binns got out. Someone at the back said:

"Wha'ss up?" A mess-tin fell with a clang, on to a rifle.

Russell got out and stood beside Binns.

"Jesus!" he said.

The road had led them up the longest slope of the hill. On this other side the land dropped sharply across bare earth ridges that broke up the green. A great mass of trees was humped halfway between here and the horizon. From a village to the south a road ran, two or three miles away, crossing this one. Normally, one might not make out the distant road, but now it was distinct, marked along its entire length by fires and by a human trek whose line was broken only here and there with a gap like a hole in a wall. Smoke from the fires was drifting north, clouding across the line and tangling among the trees of the wood on the other side.

The mortars were firing east-west, emplaced a mile down the hill and aimed across this road, the shells arc-ing up and falling on the far side of a hillock whose sides were broken with the angular shapes of vehicles and a cluster of flames. A thin, dry rattling was in the air, as stored ammunition went off. To northwards, a dozen fires, big ones, were burning along the horizon; and the bomber squadrons had come down to a few thousand feet and were going in over the target: a town whose

buildings were half-seen through a drift of smoke. Ack-ack puff-balls were floating among the planes, thistle-down among a flock of birds.

Corporal Binns said, "I s'ppose that'll be our road, down to the crossing and then right."

"Ye'."

From behind them, Smith said, "We'd have to get under the mortars."

"Yes, but you could drive a double-decker under that lot."

"They might open fire on us, with other stuff. They won't know who we are."

Binns said, "I don't know who they are, come to that."

"French," Russell said. "They're French."

Binns said, "Anyway, screw the mortars. I'm more worried about that road. That lot's going to bog us down."

Russell said, "I can see some stuff gettin' along all right—there's a fast car there, see?"

But it was difficult to see details; and Russell was ready to swear to anything, if Binns wanted persuasion to carry on in the Hispano. Harper and Whiting were out of the car, standing by another gap in the brambles, shielding their eyes against the sky-glare that was worse than clear sunshine.

Harper asked, "What're we going to do, Corp?"

Binns turned and went back to the car. "There might be another road." He fished about in the door-pockets. Mills was still fast asleep, his bare feet splayed out across the pile of rifles.

Binns couldn't find a map anywhere; he came back to the others. "We'll have to leave the car and cut across country. The road might be clearer, farther north."

Russell said, "It'll be as thick as muck from here to the coast."

"You can't drive anything along there, Mike."

"I can drive this thing through a drain, mate."

Harper was watching Whiting. Whiting hadn't said a word since he had wakened. He was staring through the brambles, with his eyes narrow and his whole face looking tight. He was

feeling very sick, inside him, but there wasn't much to show. Harper was glad about that. Whiting was finding an odd shred of gut from somewhere.

Russell was worried that Binns was going to take them across country. Russell would rather drive a car through a fire than walk anywhere. He said:

"I vote we just get in and have a go. What about you?"

He didn't look at Binns, but at Harper. Harper said:

"I don't suppose it'll make a lot of difference what we do, but there's no point in foot-slogging when there's the car."

Binns was quiet. The idea of driving down the road under the mortar-fire didn't bother him. The French might see them and blow them off the road without asking any questions first; but it was only a slight risk. There was no fire coming back from the hillock; and he thought the shells were going over there to clear out the remnants of a Boche mob that had been cut off. The thing he didn't like was the idea of getting down there on the bigger road, and being hampered, and exposed to dive-bombing and machine-gun fire: because Jerry wouldn't leave that refugee column in peace for very long.

Mills was calling from the back of the car, "What've we stopped for, mates?"

No one answered. He came clambering out.

"Wha'sser trouble, then, eh?"

"No trouble," Harper said. "We're just thinking which way to go."

Mills gazed with a monkey's alertness at the scene, and then said, "We goes down there, turns right, an' scarpers up north——"

"That's it, my cock-o. Come on!" Russell went back to the car, and Mills followed.

"I gotter stomach like a drum, what about you, eh?"

"Ye'." Russell was watching Binns, hoping the little puck-o wasn't going to make them leave the Hispano. Binns came over and said:

"You'll have to drive like stink, down to the cross-roads, in case the Froggies want to pick on us."

"Ye'. I'll drive like stink."

Binns called to Harper and Whiting and Smith. They got into the car, not saying very much. Binns took a quick look round the sky. In the north it was littered with odd planes and groups of bombers that were dodging the A.A. shells; but there was nothing heading this way. He said to Russell:

"Okay, Mike."

"We goin'?"

"Yes."

Russell started up and backed into the road. As he stopped, and slid the gears into first, Binns said:

"Hold on."

"Why?"

Binns hung his head out of the window; then he drew it back and said, "Listen."

Harper said, "Something behind."

"Yes." Binns jumped out and climbed on to the bonnet over the nearside spare wheel; then he got on to the roof, and stood looking across the brow of the hill. He was only there for two seconds and he came down with a bang and pitched himself into the car, "Quick, Mike—it's tanks!"

"Comin' up behind?"

"Yes."

Russell botched the gear in again and brought the clutch up, and the rear wheels span on the dust as the car went away with the engine howling up as Russell got peak-revs in first and second and then snicked into third, lunging down the hill with the big springs flexing over the bumps and the boys bouncing in the back:

"Jerry tanks?"

"Yes——"

"How many?"

"Whole column."

Mills lurched round on the seat and stared through the rear window with the others. The first gun-barrel was lifting across the brow of the hill, and then the whole tank came into view, tracks bright against the camouflage.

Whiting began shouting something but broke off with a choke as Harper dug a fist into him. They all knew they were

sitting like a bird in the gun-sights of the leading tank; they didn't need telling. Russell was keeping the Hispano on the road with his hands going mad on the wheel: she was two tons and there were six aboard and the road was sagging in patches. The speedometer-needle was flickering above a hundred and five k.p.h., and they were tunnelling under the shells that went arc-ing up from the mortars on the left of the road. Binns was facing his front. If the tank was going to waste a shell on them, there would only be the one, at this range. One would do. And he didn't want to watch it coming; he'd seen them before.

But he had to say it; someone had to, "Can't we go any faster?"

Russell said, "No."

SIX

RUSSELL forgot the tanks. There was nothing he could do about them. If they fired, that was it, and that was all. He was trying to think what he was going to do when he got the car down to the cross-roads. They were a mile away now, and the Hispano was plummeting down towards the great black fly-paper. The cross-roads were choked. Most of the people were coming in from the south, from the village; but a score of stragglers were coming up the road from the west, so that it was worse at the crossing than anywhere else. It didn't look as if you could elbow your way through that crowd even on foot.

He couldn't slow down, because of the tanks. He couldn't keep up this speed, because he'd ram a wall of people and wreck the car. From the rear seat, Harper was shouting something about ditching and running. But there was nowhere to run to, even if they could stop the car and get clear of it without a shell blowing them all to glory.

Russell poked about with his left hand and found the horn-button. It was a good loud blare, a single trumpet-note.

"Tubby—keep your fist on this!"

The note broke and then blared again as Binns took over, leaving Russell's hands free to do what he could with the wheel in the bare half-mile left to them. The car hit a raised crust of tarmac and went slewing badly off the crown, with the tyres shrilling thinly above the horn's high blare. Russell dragged it straight, tearing a stream of turf from the grass verge, over-controlling and slewing again, dragging it back and sending it down the last few hundred yards.

The refugees were turning their heads this way, their white faces dappling the dark of their shambling line. It was the blare of the Hispano's horn that turned their heads, but now they could see the tank column strung out from the brow of the hill, and many began screaming, and the first few were starting to run clear of the road when the shell came down. It landed slightly to the left of the cross-roads and burst there in a shock

of light, showering earth in a sudden fountain and flinging bodies into the tide of the living; and the living stampeded, their backs turned and their arms flying out as they stumbled together through the few thin trees and into the meadowland beyond the road.

The fact registered in Russell's mind that the cross-roads were almost clear and that the people on the north road were tiding away from it, so he worked at the Hispano, freeing the gears and racing the engine until it screamed, knocking into third gear and braking hard with the drag of the compression helping to kill the momentum. The car was heeling badly with its weight shifting about as one wheel locked, but he got into second gear and braked again, trying to shape for the corner. It was a right angle, and their speed was down enough to give them a hope of drifting the car through without piling off the road; but there was no real surface: the shell-burst had littered it, and a wrecked barrow was cocked over, blocking the run-in.

Binns took his hand off the horn-button and the blare stopped drilling through their heads. Russell shouted to them to hold on, and put the car at the crossing.

They hit the barrow half-way through the slide and broadside on, slinging it clear with an explosion of metal and timber that broke the slide-curve and sent the car's angle skewing out of control until Russell kicked the throttle down hard and got the rear bedding in, the treads half-gripping and half-spinning as the power went down there and steadied the drift. The transmission snatched badly as the wheels ploughed through litter and sent it clattering under the frame; but the car was pointing up the road-line and Russell had his foot well down, keeping the power there.

The second shell landed ahead of them, directly in their path, and Binns ducked forward with his head below the windscreen as Russell raised one arm and shut his eyes. The glass shattered and the blast-wave came through, and the car slowed, plunging into the rising wall of air and bits of shell that came burying into the metalwork and windows—and then they were over the crater, bucking across its ragged hollow with the two front

tyres burst and wrenching at the rims. Russell was hooked across the wheel, arms rigid and eyes open, half-conscious, hearing nothing but the aftermath of the shell's bursting. He saw nothing; but he was aware of images. He felt nothing; but he was aware of vibration. When, over the seconds, full consciousness came back, it brought the terror with it. There had been no time, before, in which to feel afraid. Emotion had been held back while the brain had worked with a desperation that had left it almost numbed; and now he felt afraid, as one feels afraid, even after years, sometimes, thinking back upon the time when there was huge danger and yet no death, when there should have been death.

But even now, time was brief enough. His brain had more to do. The car was still on the road, a machine of some sort moving on the ground, and if he tried he might keep control of it. The speed was not high; the engine was racing because his foot was locked on the throttle, but he was in low gear. Second gear, he remembered. Second, through the corner. His brain began working things out. Full throttle, but low gear, therefore not going fast. And the harsh metallic hammering out in front, the steering light: tyres gone. Running on the rims. The smell of steam; grey twists of steam whipping past the bonnet into his face: radiator gone too, wrecked by shell fragments. Engine would overheat.

He pulled his body back from the wheel, and dropped one hand, raking the gear-lever, finding third, letting the revs die, his nerves relieved by the release of strain on the engine. He brought his hand back to the wheel-rim, feeling it slippery, looking down, seeing it was blood-smothered, difficult to hold. He looked up again as something hit the car and bounced off: a man, lurching in the road. There were others, many of them. He tried to steer among them, but with the front tyres gone it was as if he were driving across ice. People were shouting, and running out of the way, and he struck another man, or woman, and slowed the car, driving with his arms braced across the wheel-rim, head peering forward. He had to drive on. They must get out of the way. This was the road; Tubby had said it was the road; they had to go north, to the coast, some coast, somewhere.

Remembering Binns, he did not look down at him. Binns would be dead. And those in the back. Mills, and—others; he could not remember their names, or what they were doing here in the car with him. Tubby and Dave. Dave Bellman. And Mike. Mike was himself. Mike Russell. Hispano, a beauty.

Someone in the back was making an ugly noise, crying or vomiting. He wished they would stop. The blood was making the wheel slippery, and there was something wrong with the front; the tyres must have gone. Wind came through the broken glass and people were shouting, hands banging against the bodywork. He drove on, and there were legs running, and a face in pain, and a stick that came cracking down on his right shoulder. They must get out of the way. He couldn't steer very well; something was wrong with the tyres. A shell had burst, a long time ago. Finished the tyres, it had. It was difficult, trying to see through the cloud of steam; and there were people, dodging about, and a dog that went yelping into the trees, yelp-yelp till it got on your nerves. He'd never been so drunk as this. Sick-drunk, he was, choking in the steam. They must get out of the way.

Suddenly he felt a rush of rage, and was shouting, his left hand punching out at the horn-button, missing it and punching again with his knuckles slipping away from the raised button because of the blood; but now he'd got it, and she was blaring all right, drilling through his head as he shouted into the steam, shouted with rage until he began choking with the steam and with the rage. Then someone's arm came up and knocked his hand away from the horn-button; and he turned his head and saw Binns. Binns was hunched against the door, soft as a sack, staring at him, not looking like Binns at all, with a face like white paper. But it must be Binns. Not dead at all. Looking like death, but alive, bloody alive-o.

Someone said, "Tubby." The voice grated out of a raw throat. "Cock-o." Someone was laughing, cracked as a bell in the hot grey stink of the steam.

Smoke was coming down, worse than the steam. Russell was alert within a few seconds of coming-to.

"Christ, we're on fire!"

"No," said Binns, "it's a truck ablaze, up the road. How d'you feel?"

"Who, me?"

Russell sat up, and saw the others. They were sitting in a row, their backs to the running-board of the Hispano. The Hispano looked like a pig-iron dump. Russell said to Binns, "Where's Dave?"

Binns looked at him, crouching on his haunches, and Russell said, "Oh, yes . . . what the hell'm I talkin' about?"

Binns said, "You've lost a lot of blood, Mike. You really feel all right?"

"Feel fine." He inspected himself. His clothes were ribboned and clotted. He was dressed in dark red rags. His right arm was thick. He said, "My God, that's swollen."

"No, that's bandages. It got all the glass, from the wind-screen. I couldn't pick all of it out, but I soaked it in brandy."

"In what, for Chri' sake?"

"I found a bottle, among a lot of stuff when a barrow came down the bank."

Russell looked at him trustingly. Tubby was off his nut. He asked, "Why soak it in brandy?"

"It's a spirit. Antiseptic."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Where's the rest?"

"We've drunk it."

"Where's my nip, then?"

"You were bleeding like a pig. No good giving you brandy."

"Well, you scoffin' bastards." He realised there were a lot of people about, going along the road at the top of the bank. The car had come down the bank. "What happened, cock-o?"

"You drove three or four miles after the shell burst."

"Three or four what? Don't talk——"

"Then you passed out. We finished up down here. Now we've got to get started again."

"Ye'." He moved his right arm. "Why?"

"The tanks'll be coming."

"What tanks? Oh, ye'. I remember. Come on, then." He stood up and fell down in a heap.

This was the nearest Corporal Binns had been to tears since the rout across the frontier on the 11th. There had been many things to make a man cry since then; but Binns was never moved by fear or frustration or hunger or fatigue. He was moved now by a mixture of pity and admiration as he watched Mike get up and then go down, a red bundle of rags with a spirit inside it that had forced it into the shape of a man standing on his feet, just for a moment. Mike was six-foot-two and built of bone, and all his life he had stood up and gone on standing. Now he had come down in a tattered blood-wet heap, and Binns was ashamed for him, and loved him.

He stood over Mike, both hands forward.

"Come on, you silly old sod, get up."

"What you swearin' for, you little short-arse?" Tubby never swore; almost never.

"Come on, get up."

Russell got on to his feet and stood swaying, while Binns held him. "Go easy. You've lost a lot of blood."

"I've got plenty more. An' I'm not as tight as a tit, like you are, on bloody brandy."

Binns held on to him for a minute. Wherever Russell's blood was, it was not in his face. He looked dead, except for his eyes.

"I'm all right," he said. "What about you?"

"Nothing happened to me. I was down in my funk-hole, under the dashboard."

Russell was trying to look along the row of men, but his eyes were flickering. The sky was flashing on and off, close against his face. "What about them, eh?"

"They're all right."

"Let go of me, for Chri' sake."

Binns moved away from him and said, "All right, then, let's have you!"

Harper and Smith got up. Mills was gazing at Russell and said, "'Ey, you don'alf look bloody untidy, mate."

Russell looked down at little Mills, trying to remember who

he was. He looked like a monkey. And who was the kid with his head down, arms on his knees? He'd been sick as a dog. Poor kid must be ill.

Binns said sharply, "Come on, Whiting. We're going."

Russell turned round and stared across the fields. The planes were coming in low, a string of them, and the people up on the road had begun screaming again, and were running down here, waving their arms, a lot of women.

Whiting lifted his head and looked at the planes, and then stood up and fell back against the Hispano, still looking at the planes. His eyes expressed nothing. Harper said, "Fighters." Smith stood with his hands in his pockets, watching quietly, one side of his face dark with drying blood that had flowed down from where splinters had ploughed across his scalp, skinning away a patch of his hair. Mills was still sitting on the running-board, watching the planes as they turned, banking and sloping down along the line of the road. A woman had fallen on her face, just by the car, and lay with her body heaving and her hands beating at the grass, and the grass muffled something that she was screaming, again and again until the sound was cut off by the first rattle of the machine-guns and the great storm of the planes.

Binns was shouting, telling them to get under the car; and they began moving suddenly, dropping on to their stomachs and crawling beneath the running-board and under the bumpers. Smith had got hold of the woman's feet and was dragging her bodily just as she lay. Faintly he could hear the screaming above the planes' sound. He pulled her underneath the car and she tried to get up; but her head banged against the chassis and she flopped down and lay still.

Harper could see the meadow from below the running-board. The green was littered with washing, with coloured clothes spread out to dry, arms and legs sticking out of the colours, something moving here and there, a face turning with a black mouth open, a child on its feet, running and running. Alice in fright, crying and running with her print dress bobbing and hair alive.

The planes came back, spread out and broken up this time,

their dark wings undulating and the guns putting out their flame-tongues as they harried the road and the meadow, filling the air with a sound that got down into the stomach and beat there in the sound box, down into the bowels and plucked at them. It was harmless, this sound, for there was no danger from the source of it—the engines and the propellers; but it was worse than the sound of the guns, and you lay under the mountain of it, crushed alive.

When the planes had gone, many of the refugees picked themselves up, and as many remained on the grass. Those who were moving did not come back to the road, but began walking slowly across to the trees at the edge of the meadow.

Underneath the Hispano, Mills said something about the planes. No one answered him. Smith put his hand against the woman's chest and felt the beating of the heart. Her head was half-turned, and he looked at her face. The skin was grimed, and dust had clung to the stains of tears; the mouth was parted, the eyelids closed and still. He was thinking about Denise; this woman was no older than she. Denise had thrown herself down and had lain almost like this, except that her eyes had been open. They had made love, for the first time, and she had lain like this, afterwards, with the green corn waving above her head. Her bared breasts had been touching the earth, just brushing its dark soil, and he had watched them, and had thought about the richness of earth and woman as she had lain there with the sun on her breasts and the green corn.

"She alive?" someone said.

"Yes."

They began crawling out. Smith stood flexing his back, looking up at the sky. Harper said, "She only knocked her head, didn't she?"

"What?" Smith looked down. "Yes. She'll be all right."

"Come on, then."

They looked at Binns. He said, "Mike, will that thing work?"

"Eh? Ye'. She's a flyer."

"Can we get it back on the road?"

"I dunno." He looked along the bank. It was not high,

and there was an earth slope not far along, where they used to bring wagons down to the field. "Ye'. Can do."

"Let's get in, then."

"No—I'll drive her back on the road, first. Too much weight an' the front wheels'll dig in over this stuff."

"All right."

Harper said, "What about the tanks, Corp?"

"That's why we've got to push on."

"They'll come by the road, though, won't they?"

"Yes. We'll try keeping ahead of them. If we start trying to walk it now, they'll overtake us, and we'll be in Jerry country, behind their lines. There'll be other stuff, after the tanks. Guns, and infantry. It's an advance, see? In the car, there's a bit of hope."

Mills was waddling off along the bank.

"Mills, where are you going?"

" 'Ave a crap."

Russell was getting into the car. When the engine started they looked at the car in surprise. Harper said, "My God, what's that thing made of?"

Binns said, "The same stuff as us." He called to Russell, "You want a push?"

"I dunno. Have to see." He put the gears in mesh and the rear wheels span on the earth, and Smith shouted:

"Hang on!"

He fell on to his knees and found the woman, pulling her out by the feet. She was still limp, but her mouth was jerking, trying to say something. Smith and Binns carried her clear of the car and propped her against the foot of the bank, leaving her and coming back, leaning their weight against the car while Russell revved up in bottom gear. They stumbled forward as the Hispano moved, and then caught up with it as Russell drove at the earth slope. The front wheels were locked over but not steering very much. Russell shouted:

"Get roun' the front, swing 'er round!"

He kept the wheels turning while they pushed against what was left of the nearside front wing, and the car swung over, nosing up the slope on to the roadway with the rear wheels

slinging out earth behind. Russell let the engine idle, and while they were climbing aboard he went to look round the car. One front tyre had run completely off the rim, and had been left somewhere along the road. The other had come off the rim on the inside, and its remains were wrapped round the brake drum and the axle. A big chunk of shell had gone through the radiator, leaving the cooling system half-full and with no circulation. The rest of the damage was unsightly but not serious. Russell came back to the driving-seat. The Hispano had four wheels on, and the engine was turning. That was enough to get them along at faster than walking speed. If he could keep the car on the road, he could equal the speed of the tanks.

"Where's Mills?"

"I dunno." Harper and Smith sat in the back. Whiting was propped up on an occasional seat, elbows on knees and head down. Binns, in the front, said, "He all right?"

"Yes," Harper said.

"Mills!" shouted the corporal.

"I'm comin'—keep yer 'air on."

He was limping up the earth slope. When he had got into the back of the car and the door was shut he opened his right hand.

"There y'are, mates."

"Christ—fags!"

"Where did you get 'em?"

He let them pick one each. "Never you mind."

"They're Frenchies."

"No good turnin' yer snotty nose up."

Someone found some matches. Russell was hitched round in the driving-seat, looking at Mills. "You'll do," he said. "You'll do, my little puck-o."

They passed the match round, lighting five cigarettes before it went out. Harper gave Whiting a nudge, and when the white face looked up he said, "Want this?"

Whiting took the cigarette. "Thanks." When he lit the cigarette with another match, his hand was perfectly steady. Harper watched him and thought: he's changing, inside; he's getting used to it.

Russell let the clutch in gently and the Hispano moved, crawling forward with a steamroller noise from the front rims. When he changed to third gear, somewhere above twenty-five miles an hour, the whole car vibrated so much that he slowed a little, to keep their teeth in their heads. Binns said, "Someone keep a look-out, at the back, the whole time. We shan't hear them coming, with this racket." He looked at Russell. "How long can we keep going, at this speed?"

"I dunno. If I can hold 'er on the road, we can go a few miles till she seizes up."

"She going to seize up?"

"Ye'. There's no water goin' round."

"Can't we fix it?"

"Ye'. Go an' stick your arse through the hole in the rad."

Binns said no more. The air was rushing through the windscreen-frame, making his eyes water. He kept his cigarette cupped in his hand, to stop it burning away. He tried to take stock. They had been lucky. They were still a machine with a driver and crew. No one was badly hurt. They were shocked, bruised and cut about, nothing worse than that. But it hadn't been luck that had driven them through the shell-burst and three or four miles farther on; it hadn't been luck that put these cigarettes in their mouths. He felt grateful to Mike and Mills, and thought well of the other. No one had panicked or broken down, not even the Whiting kid. He could still smoke a cigarette and obey an order.

They weren't in bad shape. They looked a sight worse than they had when the woman had laughed at them, seeing them on the rubbish-dump; but they were all right. This was the road north, and B.S.M. Leech had told them they had to join up again, at the coast. Thirty or forty miles now, maybe less.

"How's your arm, Mike?"

"Eh?" The wind rushed through; the wheels clattered.

"Arm—all right?"

"Ye'." Russell sat tight at the wheel, the cigarette in his mouth, its yellow paper burning down fast in the wind. Binns wondered how much blood you could drain out of this man and still see him run.

Binns looked in front of him again, and thought of Margaret. If she could see him now, would she feel revolted? If any of their wives or mothers or girls could see them now, they wouldn't recognise them; but suppose they could recognise them, what would they think? Six men, white in the face, two days' growth of beard and muck and dried blood framing their eyes, their eyes bloodshot, their hair matted, their clothes filthy and their hands raw; riding along in a car that was stricken and mangled, the marks of shell splinters and machine-gun bullets on the outside, the inside splattered with blood and vomit and splintered glass—in a car that, for all this, retained its shape to a macabre degree and rolled onwards like a hearse through the driveway of some unnamed hell, bearing its cargo of half-dead men to a grave already choked, where no cross was. Seeing them like this, their women would feel revolted, and would run from them. Yet there was not much needed to make them as they were before; water, a little food, a razor, a night's sleep, and fresh clothes to wear.

Binns found that he had come down to the present, and to their situation. His thoughts had refused to stay with the women, to remember home. These were their urgent needs, then: a wash, something to eat, and sleep. The next time they were forced to stop, he would see to these things before doing anything else, or they would never reach the coast.

"Mike."

"Ye'?"

"If you want someone to take over, let me know."

"What's wrong, then?"

"If you get tired."

"Who, me?"

Binns smoked his cigarette down to his nails, and threw the end away.

For three miles the road ran straight and was clear but for a few bodies, an overturned truck, a gaggle of Frenchwomen standing by a cottage. Then, soon after the road began curving through poplars, there were refugees again, spread out thinly, not getting in the way, hearing the Hispano approaching

with its bare-wheeled din, and keeping to one side, letting it pass. A few of the women called out derisively as they saw the car, then were quiet as they saw the men inside.

A group of men were walking two abreast, and as the car neared them, Russell said, "Some of our lot, look!"

Binns said, "Yes. Don't stop, Mike."

"I wasn' goin' to."

Heads turned and the group broke up as the men stared into the car, not being able to see at first that there were British inside; then they called out:

" 'Ey, give us a lift!"

"Got'ny room, chum?"

" 'Old on!"

They faded behind, unseen, a chorus of cat-calls.

From the back of the car Mills asked, "Why di'n' we stop?"

"We can't pick anyone up, or we shan't get through ourselves."

Mills said energetically, "Well, we can't jus' go drivin' by like bleedin' lords!"

Smith said, "Have you looked at yourself lately? You're bleeding, all right, but you don't look much like a lord."

"But they were our lot!"

"They won't be the only ones," said Binns. "If we see anyone wounded, we'll pull 'im on board."

Mills said something else about it, but the words were lost in the racket. Russell was having a job to keep the car on the road now, because every time he swerved to pass a straggler they nearly slid into the trees.

"Tubby, give 'em a blast, now an' then."

Binns held his hand ready over the horn-button. The road was dropping away now, and narrowing. Between here and the oil smoke that billowed on the horizon there was a small town, with roofs rising among many trees. Binns saw a signboard, leaning at an angle. Malins-du-pont. It meant nothing.

Within a mile of the town, the stragglers on the road became thick, and there were the usual barrows and carts piled with possessions, and children, and cows, and goats. The Hispano

had caught up with the rearguard of a refugee column, and Binns kept his fist on the horn, until it was useless and they had to slow down to a crawl.

Harper was leaning forward. "Hey, Corp!"

"What?"

"We going to try gettin' some grub?"

"Yes. If we can get as far as the town, we——"

The sound rocked the car and Binns was left staring at Harper with both their mouths open and their eyes wide, their ear-drums blocked. There was no air-blast, yet it felt as if the sound itself had slapped them across the face. A shudder ran through the earth.

Mills was shouting something, his face creased like a walnut, his eyes shocked to blankness. Then the sound was over. Binns turned away from Harper and looked through the wind-screen-frame. Two seconds, perhaps three, had passed; and now the shells burst, behind the Hispano, more than a mile behind.

Binns relaxed. The car was crawling. The refugees had stopped shouting their shrill surprise. The earth no longer shuddered.

Mills's voice came, "What was that, then?"

Russell tried to keep the car moving, and looked at Binns. "Where are they?"

"I don't know." The sound would come again, in a moment; and then again perhaps for an hour, two hours. Somewhere behind the town, among the trees, there was a pack of heavy artillery, ten- or twelve-inch guns, a pack of them. There had been no warning even of their existence, certainly none of their preparedness to fire. The sound would come again; but it would be expected now. Even this terrifying din would be fitted into the known background, a factor accounted for.

The Hispano came to a stop. Heads, faces, shoulders, sticks, bundles went flowing past it and round it and ahead of it, borne along on a gabble of *patois*.

Smith said, "What's the score, Corp?" He was leaning forward. His voice was interested, nothing more.

"Those are our guns," said Binns. He was conscious, saying

it, of a thrill. To be able to say, of a sound as tremendous as that barrage, that it was 'ours', was almost to boast that one was the son of Thor. One was no longer propped on a rubbish-dump. "Ours, or French. They're emplaced somewhere on the other side of this town, firing over our heads."

Smith said, "Charming."

"What're they firin' at?" asked Mills.

"The tanks, behind us."

"Well, what're——"

The ears blocked. The mouth stayed open. The earth shuddered. Two seconds, three. A great coughing, behind them, beyond the curve of the trees. Breath came back.

"We advancing, then?" asked Harper.

Binns shrugged. "I doubt it. Probably a rearguard entrenchment, keeping off the worst while chaps like us get north."

"How long can those guns keep it up?"

"Until Jerry sends a bomber-force."

"What do we do, cock-o?"

Binns had to rouse himself. It was a treat, to sit here and know that they were under the cover of a dozen heavy guns. For the first time since long ago they were being protected, by their own Army. The guns didn't know they were here; if they had known, it would have meant nothing; there were six battle-stragglers sitting dead-beat in a wrecked car on the south road: so what? The guns were dealing with a tank-column, with a Boche advance, with the tag-end throes of a war that had never begun, that was nearly over now, that was less a war than a rout. There were six British soldiers on the south road? There were sixty thousand, north. All the same, Binns let himself wallow in the thought that his Army was looking after him again, at last.

For a moment, before he roused himself to answer Russell's question, he dreamed on. A signal had come in to the colonel, 'Corporal Binns and his party are proceeding north in advance of enemy tanks. Their retreat is threatened.' So the colonel had issued orders to the battery major; and the major had jumped to command the guns, raising his field-glasses, working out the range. Then the final orders to individual gun

commanders. Bearing one-five-oh. Range four thousand. *All guns—fire!*

The earth shuddered. The interval, the air-rush, the slim, deadly shapes. Then the holocaust. Tanks heeling over, their armour split, their tracks flying off like elastic-bands. And Corporal Binns and his party were saved.

"For Chri' sake, what're you grinning for?"

He looked at Russell. Russell was looking at Binns as if he thought that Binns had gone off his nut. Binns thought that Russell was right. He said:

"Was I grinning?"

"Either that, or you're goin' to be sick. You feel all right?"

"Listen," Binns said. "We'll get through this lot of Froggies, into the town. Then we'll split up in pairs, and scrump about for some food——"

"An' some fags——"

"And some fags. Report back to the car in fifteen minutes, or when you've got so much that you can't carry any more." Mills gave a mirthless cackle. "Then we'll have a wash down, before we push on. We'll eat the grub on our way, to save time. Mike, if you see anything on wheels better than this, commandeer it."

Mills said, "What shall I do if I sees an 'orse, Corp?"

"Stuff it."

Russell botched the gear in and they began crawling forward again. "On the blower, Tubby."

Binns put his hand on the horn-button, and every time there was a clear gap in the tide of refugees, Russell banged his foot down and the Hispano clattered through.

The barrage went up at minute-intervals. The main street of the town was choked with the refugees and with a clutter of trucks that had bottle-necked to a standstill on the north exit and been left abandoned. Nothing was on fire, but percussion had cleared the glass out of nearly all the windows.

Russell had backed the Hispano into a yard, so that it faced the street. This way, he could get out more quickly if they had to leave in a hurry; and if anyone thought of taking the car in

their fifteen-minute absence, the sight of its wrecked radiator and bare wheels would make them think again. He went off with Binns. The doors of the first two houses were bolted. The grocery-store had been cleared of anything edible it had ever stocked. The first café was a shell, except for tables and chairs. Then there was a big house with the front door wide open, so they went in, and opened the first door they came to, on the ground floor.

Three men were in the room: an officer and two sergeants. They stopped what they were doing and looked at Russell and Binns. Binns brought up a rough salute, surprised into it. Russell just stared. The captain said:

"Good God, where have you sprung from?"

Russell stopped staring and tried to bring up his right arm, but caught it on the door and bit off a curse of pain. Binns said:

"Been on the road, sir."

"Look as if you've been down a drain."

The captain and the two sergeants went on working. There were a few sticks of furniture in the room—a desk, filing-cabinet, portable safe—and service-equipment spread about. The captain said, "What sort of shape are you in, Corporal?"

"Fine, sir."

"When did you look at yourself last?"

"We've no food, sir, that's all."

"Anyone with you?" He slung some papers into a case.

"Four others, sir."

"Anyone hurt?"

"No, sir."

"You in charge of your party?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were your last orders?"

"Get to the coast, sir."

"That's what you're doing?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll be bloody lucky." He folded a sheaf of maps and tied them. "Sar'nt Scott, can we raise rations for six men?"

"All gone up to the position, sir."

The other sergeant was looking at Russell, mouth puckered in a silent whistle. He murmured, "You say you're not hurt, boy?"

"I'm okay, Sarge."

"Stap me."

Sergeant Scott said, "There might be a bit left in the ditched ration-truck, sir, if they can get it out."

The captain slung his respirator down from the wall.

"Well, we can't spare any of our own stores." He looked at Binns. "This dump's due to go up any minute. We'll go up with it, I expect." Binns saw that his eyes were flickering, although they were straight enough. And there was a slight breathlessness behind the quick, easy words. "Until that happens, we're keeping up our fire. It might be hours or days. There's not much stores left, and we don't know how long it's got to last. So don't think we're mean."

"No, sir."

"I'd send you along there, but they wouldn't give you a sausage. There's a truck ditched in a lane just where the main street goes under trees, far end of the town. You might find a bit of hard tack left in the wreckage. If you do, it's all yours, God help you."

He took a packet of cigarettes off the table and threw them across to Binns. "Capstan. They're blended better."

"Thank you, sir."

Binns held the packet in his left hand. The captain said, "Go on, someone give 'em a light."

Binns opened the packet and held it out to Russell. Russell tried to pull a cigarette out, but his stiff blood-caked fingers were too clumsy, and Binns was no better. One of the sergeants did it for them, and gave them a light. Sergeant Scott said, "You foot-sloggin'?"

"No, Sarge. Got a car," Russell said. "She's a flyer—'Spano-Suiza."

"For Chri' sake."

The room seemed to cave in as the guns fired again, and a tin mug danced on the window-sill. The captain said to Binns, "You'd better get out of here. Jerry's bringing up artillery

behind tanks. It's a spearhead, get it?" He still spoke with an over-brusqueness, the succinct phrases weakened by the tone of cold anxiety.

"Yes, sir." Binns tucked the cigarettes into his blouse. "How far's the coast, sir?"

"Twenty miles due north."

Russell's head jerked, "That all?"

"It'll be enough. Roads are choked solid. Good luck."

They managed a better salute, then stuck the cigarettes into their mouths and went out into the street. The street was clearer: the refugees were thinning; their vanguard had found a way round the bottleneck of trucks, and the tag-end was left behind: old women, bone-white and tattered in black, old eyes calm in the hollows of yellow skin, calm with acceptance beyond bewilderment; and children, reaching up again and again for a hand, sometimes finding one, sometimes finding an answer when they cried a question, but not always; and men, one-legged men, shrivelled men too old to live and too alive to die, for another few paces, another half-kilometre, along this painful road where they limped to the end of eighty years with the gunfire knocking in their bones.

"Think it's pukkah?" said Russell.

"What?"

"This place is goin' up in smoke?"

"They ought to know. We'll shift, anyhow."

An old woman dropped, suddenly, in front of them, pitching down with a soft sound, the dry sound of a bundle of sticks; and two children, seeing the roll of bread in the hooked claw of her hand, snatched it and ran, skipping along, catching up with the others to share it out.

Russell muttered, "Christ."

"Come on. Back to the car—we'll wait for the rest, then get out of here."

Whiting was there, sitting on the front bumper, watching the roadway. He raised his head as Binns and Russell came up.

"You all right?" asked Binns.

"Yes." The word was slit out of a tight mouth. He looked away from them. Binns left him there. He wasn't sure about

this kid, whether he was scared stiff or bloody-minded or both. He seemed as if he were going to blow up any minute; but he never did. Perhaps that was just his defence, to stop people getting at him.

"Mike, we'll have a wash."

"Ye'."

There was a tap against the wall of the yard, with a length of hose fixed on with wire.

"Suppose there's no soap, Tubby, anywhere?"

"It's not worth looking. The stuff's about as good as cheese, for giving a lather. Not like the stuff at home."

Russell, hearing the word, had a sudden brief vision of a clean, tiled bathroom, a landing and stairs and hall with a Christmas tree in the hall, lit up—then the guns fired again and the water-jet from the end of the hose went into his boot. He tried not to think about home, or what the captain had said. We're getting to the coast, sir. You'll be bloody lucky.

The kids had snatched the bread with the quickness of sparrows, darting away in case the dead old woman got up and ran after them with her bony claw outstretched to pluck at their clothes. The stairs, and the hall, with the Christmas tree lit up, a glow of red and blue and yellow lamps, a surprise until tomorrow: don't let them see it, it's to be a surprise. That's a present for them, that long parcel. Don't let them see; it's a surprise. A present for them. A roll of bread.

The guns fired. The ground shook. Then the coughing, in the distance.

Mills came limping into the yard, his battle-dress blouse overblown with a burden. He said:

"Where d'you get them fags, eh?"

"Here you are," said Binns. He opened the packet.

"Strike me! English!"

"Yes." Binns gave him a light.

"Di'n't you find any grub, mates?" The cigarette was a joy. It was a little cloud down out of heaven. He stood there puffing, a Derby winner.

Binns told him what had happened. "Soon as we've washed off a bit, we'll push on and find that ration-truck."

Mills took various items from his blouse: a chunk of cheese, half a sausage, some bread, a tomato. He put them carefully into the car, then pulled off the blouse to have a wash. "Wha'ss this stuff?" he asked, as Russell passed him the hose.

"Water."

"Cor—all runny, i'n'it?"

Binns was helping Russell to get his blouse on. The right sleeve had been cut off, to make room for the bandaging. Russell had never asked what the bandages were, but he suspected Binns had lost his vest.

They were standing there, like that, the one helping the other, when the air rushed above their heads and a shell came down somewhere among the houses. There was the bitter metallic sound of metal on stone, a deadly sound, so much worse than when they came down on grassland, among trees.

Mills was standing in a crouch, his chest bare, one arm washed and the other filthy. He said:

"Where did that come from, for Chri' sake?"

"Get your clothes on," Binns said. "We'll have to get under cover."

"That wasn' fired from off of a tank, you know." He was still crouched, suspicious.

Russell said, "No. That captain said Jerry was bringin' up guns."

"'E wasn' far wrong, then."

"Come on—get your clothes on and find some cover."

The air rushed. They ducked. Among buildings again, metal on stone, deadly and deafening. Binns straightened up and almost tripped over Whiting's feet as he turned towards the sheds.

"Get under cover, kid."

Whiting looked up at him. The look in his eyes made the corporal shiver. They were calm eyes. In a calm world, they would have looked normal. Now they looked mad. The kid didn't seem to realise there were shells coming over.

Binns knocked his arm, "Come on, then!"

Whiting nodded and got up from the bumper of the Hispano, looking round uncertainly. Binns said, "Try those sheds."

He swung round again. "Mills, come away from that tap! Get under cover, you prat!"

Russell said, "Under the car's the best place, cock-o!"

"All right, then—get under it. *Mills!*"

Mills came away from the tap with water streaming from his hair and face and shoulders. He had judged there to be about one minute before the next shell came down, and had turned the hose on himself regardless of clothes. Now he ran like a drowned monkey for the car, crouching against it as they heard the rush of the air above them. The shell landed short, pitching down into the main street, almost in sight of the yard. Its flash was bright against the line of houses, and fragments came flying—metal and brick and tile and stone, fluting and singing through the air, falling with a deadly patter, ricocheting against the cobbles and the timber, snicking against the body-work of the Hispano and sending Mills diving beneath it quick as a rabbit.

"Who's this?" Russell was lying on his stomach, watching the yard. Someone came running in from the street.

"Smith."

Binns called, "Under the car!"

Smith's legs came lunging across the cobbles. A bread-loaf rolled under the car as he got down. They shifted and made room for him. Mills said, "Where's 'Arper, mate?"

"Coming."

A shudder ran through the cobbles as the British guns fired. Jerry answered, within seconds. Between these sounds, another was coming in, a heavy persistent drone. It was lost as the shell landed. It landed on the roof of the house opposite the yard. The men under the Hispano couldn't see the roof; they could see only the front of the house and the street and the man running past the house and turning into the yard. He reached the yard and had his back to the house when the house caved in under the exploding shell. The front wall bellied outwards from the sudden network of fissures; then the wreckage came down, falling across the street and into the yard and pitching the man down on his face and then covering him in the deluge of stone that was flooding

across the cobbles, rising in a wave and then falling again.

The only one who was still watching the yard was Whiting. He lay on his stomach with his eyes wide open, watching. Binns and Russell and Mills were struggling to turn their bodies away from the rush of rubble; Smith had dragged himself sideways so that his head was behind a front wheel. At the last moment, some kind of sense flickered in Whiting's mind, and he just lowered his head and clasped his hands round it.

Chips of brick came pattering under the front of the Hispano among a wave of dust that blotted out the light. Someone began coughing. Someone shouted a word. They lay for a long time with their eyes shut, trying not to suck the dust into their lungs. A hand moved, pulling a sleeve across the face, pressing the cloth against the nostrils. A mouth opened, letting out pent breath, shutting tight again. Someone rolled over, his boot banging against the metal frame. The nearer guns fired; the cobbles bounced; the rubble was disturbed. When the ear-drums expanded again, there was the droning sound, loudening above.

With the slack tongue of a man half-asleep Binns said:

"Was that Harper?"

"Yes." It was the kid who answered. Whiting. It was a clear answer, a short word sharply uttered, without a shred of expression.

Smith began crawling into the open. Binns said:

"Stay where you are."

Smith went on crawling. Russell said, "Tubby, can you hear that lot?"

"Yes. Bombers."

Mills said, "Smithy!"

There was no answer. Smith was crawling on his hands, a long dust-smothered moving shape with bent elbows, some species of crawling thing that moved blindly out of a cave. The next shell came well over, bursting beyond the street and sending a rattle of metal and flint to echo among the buildings. Silence did not come back. The drone came back, heavy and monotonous and very loud now, pressing down from the sky.

Smith stood up, and then bent forward to climb the hump of

rumble. Whiting watched him from below the Hispano. Binns called, "Smith! Get back here!"

Smith clambered over the rubble, pulling at some of the smaller pieces. Their clatter sounded sharply in the drone. A voice as thin as a reed in wind, with nothing human about it, nothing sane, cried, "What are you doing? Leave him alone! Leave him alone!"

Mills shouted at Whiting, "*Shuddup!*" A noise like that was worse than the drone, worse than the guns.

Smith was coming back. They watched his legs. His boots moved clumsily over the rubble and the cobbles. The drone was very loud now, and Binns said:

"Mike. We'll have to find a cellar. Quick."

He crawled out and stood up. Russell followed him. Binns shouted, "Mills! Get the kid out!"

Smith went with Russell and Binns, across to the wall. It was the wall of a house. There was a door. Russell hit it with his left shoulder and went pitching inside. Mills was shouting at Whiting, trying to drag him out. A group of shells came over, but they were silent in the drone of the planes until they fell, a long way off, up near the British guns.

Russell and Smith were going down a slope of wooden slats, a ladder of some kind, rotten with age. Binns came back into the doorway and began shouting again, but Mills had Whiting with him, lurching over the cobbles to the doorway. The three of them were inside when the first stick dropped; and that was the worst noise of all, worse even than the reedy madness of Whiting's voice. It was hard to believe one could hear a sound like this and not die of it.

Smith, who was standing near a ventilator in the cellar wall, saw the glass sucked out; a rush of foetid air went past their heads from the doorway. Mills, who was last down the ladder, broke the slats and went through, fetching up with his arms breaking the fall and a searing pain flaring in his groin where the split timber had caught him. Russell was trying to pull him clear. They hustled him into the cellar just before the next bombs fell. Either they were farther away, or the sound, being expected, seemed less terrible.

They stood in pale light that was shedding down from the ventilator. When the worst of the sound had died away to a rattle of sliding masonry, Binns looked at Smith and said:

"Did you find him?"

"Yes."

"No use, eh?"

"No."

Mills was crumpled on the floor, arching his body round the groin, hands clamped there.

"You been hit, cock-o?"

"Nah."

"What's up?"

"Nu'ink." He rocked his body, his breath fluttering in and out.

Binns had been looking after the packet of Capstans. He handed it round in the gloom, bending down to put a cigarette between Mills's lips. Then they couldn't find a match, and they stood with the cigarettes in their mouths staring at each other as the next pattern of bombs came down on the north reaches of the town. The noise came, and they forgot they were soldiers, forgot there was a war and that they were in France and this was the enemy, this noise. They stood still, with the pale light flickering and the walls pattering and the dust feathering down from the ceiling, more gentle than snow. Some time after the noise had stopped, Russell kicked out, cursing.

"What's up——"

"Rats, a lot of 'em."

That had been the pattering sound along the walls, then. Rats were down here, trapped like men.

"Come on, then, who's got a match?"

Whiting had. He rattled the box.

"Good-o!"

Whiting took a match out and struck it, holding its flame towards the tips of the cigarettes as they were thrust forward, each face thrusting forward as if they were conspirators scrutinising this one man who held the little flame, suspecting he was a stranger. The flame was steady, in steady fingers. It lit three of the cigarettes and then blew out as a current of air went sucking through the cellar. Immediately there followed

the sound-waves, and the ventilator fluttered with sour yellow light. Dust fell softly in the near-darkness as the house above them shuddered.

Whiting struck another match. Smith watched his face, quietly astonished. Something was happening to the kid. He had stopped being sick and crying and breaking down. This was the worst they had suffered; down here in this rat-ridden tomb they were nearer to death than to life, for the drone was filling the sky: but Whiting held the match steadily and lit Smith's cigarette, and then his own. For a moment Smith had looked directly into Whiting's eyes, their two faces illuminated by the small flame. There was nothing to see, in his eyes. No fear, no courage, no emotion, nothing. Cold, black, blank.

The earth shuddered. A rack of bricks came down through the town with the rattle of shunting trucks. The ventilator fluttered with sick flickering light. The cigarettes glowed in the dark, a few slow fireflies adrift among the dust that settled, softer than moths.

A squealing began. It began almost at their feet. It was shrill, and would not stop. Russell was kicking out, his boot crashing against the wall, a crate, a heap of junk. A bottle smashed, its fragments tinkling in the harsh bellow that Russell gave. He kicked and kicked and the squealing rose more shrill, then stopped. Even through his heavy boot, the softness had been felt, as the toe had struck the wall, with the squealing between, soft and slippery and hideous in the dark.

"I'm gettin' out," he said.

"Me too." Mills was standing up.

Russell was groping for the bottom of the ladder. Binns said, "You can't go up till the raid's over." His voice had no conviction.

Mills warned Russell, "Wood's rotten, mate. Watch it."

"Ye'. Give us your hand."

Russell helped Mills up the rotten slats, giving him a bunk-up to clear the gap, then following. Behind them the others came, saying nothing.

They were all at the top, standing near the door into the yard, when the next stick straddled the roofs, in the far end of

the town. The nearer roofs were silhouetted by the flash; then the ground shifted on jelly; then there was the long cascade of sound following the explosion. A new billow of smoke rose, blending into the rest, its soft base coloured with black and orange curdling together as flames raced.

The drone was diminishing. In a minute, Russell said:

"Tubby."

"What?"

"They're goin'."

"Yes."

They stood listening. After five minutes, Binns realised that the enemy shelling had ceased. It had been left to the bombers to wipe out the British guns.

"Corp."

"Yes?" He looked at Smith.

"Our guns've stopped."

"Yes." The young captain had spoken slickly, but his eyes had flickered with nerves. "This dump's due to go up any minute. We'll go up with it, I expect."

There was near-silence now in Malins-du-pont: it was as nearly silent as any place can be, where one army is routing another and resistance is more desperate than the attack. In the north guns were rumbling constantly, and the sound of planes was still in the sky; but here there was local quiet—yet, even here, not total peace, for timber was crackling as flames spread among the buildings; and a chimney crashed in the distance, a chimney or a wall or a roof or a floor, a gentle cascade of masonry and wood, a casual afterthought.

Binns walked through the doorway into the yard, and stood taking in long steady breaths. The others came out, looking at the yard and the street, trying to remember how they had looked before. That had been a house over there, and there had been cobbles, here.

Mills looked at the others, wanting to laugh at their faces. Their faces were masked with dust, and their mouths were slits in the dust, their eyes bright pockets in its muck-thick film. They all looked like Zombies. He wanted to say: You look like a lot o' Zombies, you lot do. But his tongue was heavy and his

throat clotted with dust, and there would be no point in it, no heart in it.

He saw the tap, with the hose on it, a thin bright leak of water creeping down. He took a step towards the tap and then buckled his body, hissing with pain.

Quietly Russell said, "You get it in the crutch, cock-o?"

"Yeh."

"Bad?"

"No. It winds yer, tha's all, don' it?"

"Poor old cock-o. Won't last long, that won't."

"'Adn' better."

Smith was looking at the long mound of rubble that had been flung across the yard from the house. It was six feet high in the middle, and the biggest stones were solid flint, a couple of hundredweight each. They stuck out of the lighter rubble of bricks, a group of tombstones. It would take nearly a day, to shift it all. There would be no point, even if they had the time.

Binns was remembering Harper when he had first seen him. Alert eyes and well-made features; his speech dry and deft; long-fingered, definitive hands, always moving to a purpose, never doodling at a loss or fidgeting. Of them all in Leech's odds-and-sods department, Binns had liked that man the best.

The flames crackled beyond the roof-tops and the gaps. The smoke went drifting north, loose as dark hair in the wind. The shelling had stopped. The British guns were silent. The bombers had gone. The near-silence was uneasy.

Binns said, "Listen, you blokes. If we don't get out of here very soon, we shall cop it."

Mills said, "That'll be a change, won' it?"

"What are you on about now, Tubby?"

"Jerry's on his way, that's what I'm on about. Now the guns've gone up, he'll be on the move again. Up through here." It was very difficult, just when you wanted to drop down and feel thankful you were still alive, to get going again, and think out how best to escape and go on escaping, till your feet or your heart gave out and you dropped down, anyway, with no

choice. It was very difficult, having a choice, another chance. You began to carry it with you, stumbling along under the growing weight of its burden.

He took in a breath. What the hell was he thinking of?

"Mike!"

"Ye'?"

"Can we get that car out?"

"I dunno——"

"Well, make up your mind. Have a look."

"All right, cock-o. No-need to——"

"Get on with it, then. Mills, are you bleeding?"

"Nah. On'y a bit crocked——"

"Get into the car, then. Sort out the grub. You other two come and give me a hand with that gate."

Russell went to the Hispano and yanked the bonnet off, dropping it clear. The old girl was going to run hot, by God, if she ran at all; and she wouldn't want her bonnet on any more. He took the hose-pipe and kicked at the rubber joint below the header-tank, breaking the aluminium flange, and stuffing the hose into the hole. Then he turned on the tap, and stood there praying that the block wouldn't crack when the cold water went through the overheated jackets.

Binns's party had thrown the gate open. On the other side was a track, leading into the street.

"That'll do us."

He brought them back into the yard, and they began clearing away the rubble that had flowed up to the front of the Hispano and round the wheels. Water came gushing up from the smashed radiator, and Russell turned the tap off, pulled the hose away and climbed in, banging the starter. The cylinders fired, on full choke. In a moment he pushed the choke in and revved up two or three times. She was missing on one, that was all.

"She'll do, Tubby."

"What about petrol?"

"A quarter left. About five gallons."

Binns told the others to get in. They had cleared the cobbles sufficiently to swing the car round on full lock.

Russell was biting on a lump of sausage that Mills had given

him. When he went into gear, the front wheels held the lock for a yard, then slid, banging over the cobbles. He backed, clouting the wall, then went forward again, forcing the offside front wheel over a clutter of bricks and shaping for the gate.

"Go right, do we, Tubby?"

"Yes. There's a track."

Only one of them was looking behind him, when the car rattled out of the yard; this was Whiting; he was staring through the frame of the rear-window, over the icicle-bright edges of the broken glass to the long mound of stones. The springs rocked over the cobbles and he caught his head on the roof, but went on staring at the stones, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his eyes narrowed, until the stones were out of sight behind a wall. Then he faced his front, and sat with his eyes calm, hands on knees, feet together on the pile of rifles. His voice was cold.

"What's this town?"

"Eh?"

Binns said, "Malins-du-pont."

Russell swung the car down the short earth track and braked when they reached the main street. "We can't go up that way, Tubby, it's blocked."

"I know. Find a way round."

"Have to go back a bit, the way we came in."

"Yes. I'll look for a turning."

It was unpleasant to drive south, even for a hundred yards, knowing that by now the enemy would be coming north along this road. They sat in silence, staring through the empty window-frames at the houses, the road, the wreckage.

"Try that one, Mike."

The front rims went skating, then gripped, turning the car into the side road. A heap of rubble was in the middle of the road, blocking it. Russell stopped. As he backed the car, Smith said:

"I wonder if there's any transport, up by the guns?"

Binns hung his arm over the seat-back, watching the line Russell was taking. He said, "Your way a bit, Mike, there's a big stone."

"Right-o."

Binns looked at Smith and said, "You mean transport we could use instead of this?"

"Yes. We shan't get far with this."

"It'll take us to the guns. Then we'll have a look." He did his best to sound casual about it. They were going to be lucky to get anywhere, in anything. The tanks had been nearer than five miles when the guns had stopped them. There would still be many left, however accurate the guns had been, because tanks were easy to disperse under bombardment. And there was the artillery. There'd be small stuff, light quick armament, as well as the heavy guns. And infantry, packed in transport. Heading along this road.

The Hispano stopped turning and went forward again, south. The feeling is never good, the feeling of going the wrong way on a bus, missing a station and going on, the wrong way, on a train. It is a futile situation, furnished with nothing more comfortable than frustration, regret, self-criticism. It is much worse to go a mile backwards than to stop for a breakdown, losing exactly the same time. The spirit drags, over every backward inch of the way. This situation, at Malins-du-pont, possessed the added torture of great peril. So they sat silent, their white dust-caked faces bobbing at the window-frames as the car rattled on south.

Binns said, "Try that one. Quick."

They lurched across a heap of rubbish and clattered into a side-street. A house had collapsed, blocking the way with a twelve-foot wall of wreckage, but there was a street crossing this one before it. Russell sped up, then braked, slewing the Hispano to the right. This street was not blocked entirely, but a few obstacles were in their path: a barrow with one wheel broken, pitched over on its side, the load lying spilled across the gutter; farther along a woman's body on its back, feet in the gutter and face to the sky; a scatter of bricks, down from a house past the corner, half-across the street.

"Keep on, Mike."

"Ye'."

At least they were moving north now. North, however

slowly. Binns said, "Mills, you sit tight. You other two, shift the barrow as soon as we get to it."

"Okay, Corp."

Russell slowed. Binns jumped out with Smith and Whiting, and while they moved the barrow he ran on until he reached the woman. He looked at nothing but her feet; he concentrated on the black-holed stockings and the cracked shoes, dragging the legs round so that she lay along the narrow pavement. Then he ran on towards the slope of fallen bricks and began clearing the way, kicking some of them aside, picking the others up and slinging them clear. He heard the running of boots as Smith and Whiting came up, with the Hispano crawling behind them. The bricks went flying with a dry musical sound as they bent over the heap, scratching like chickens in the yellow dust. Russell got out of the car to help. They worked for ten minutes, never pausing. They knew what they were doing. They were shifting these bricks. They did not think beyond that. It was a simple task, an end in itself. They forgot the car that must be driven through, forgot the tanks, the guns, the infantry. They were shifting bricks, these bricks.

Mills watched them. Twice he had tried to get out and help, but the nausea reared up and nearly swamped him. It was much better now; but when he moved, his whole body buckled about the focal agony. He must rest. At any moment he might have to move, have to, as fast as he could. He must rest, and wait for that. He ate some cheese, watching them. The cheese was dry and salty; crumbs of it broke off and clung to the muck and stubble of his chin, and he did not know. He would have been mildly disgusted had he known, for he was a neat little man, and tidy; or had been, when men had lived with better grace than animals.

The bricks were nearly clear, pitched up against the wall by the diving hands. Whiting went down suddenly, one arm crooked to save himself, his head catching a stone. Russell picked him up bodily, standing him on his feet. His face was blanched and his head rolled.

"Wha'ss up?"

Smith helped to steady him. "Fred. Come on."

"It's all right, cock-o."

The head stopped rolling and the eyes opened. They were blank; then they darkened. His mouth tried to move.

"All right, Fred. You're all right."

He brought up a hand to his head, and his feet jerked out for purchase on the litter.

"What?" he said thinly. "What?"

Binns said, "Put him in the car."

Whiting straightened up and looked at them again, knocking Russell's arm away. "Dizzy. Felt dizzy." He swung round, trying to pick up another brick, but Binns grabbed him and said:

"Back in the car, chum—we've finished."

He followed them, knocking his shoulder against the door and floundering inside. Mills said:

"You want some grub, you do. You got an empty stomach, that's your trouble, Fred." He gave Whiting a piece of bread and the tomato, but Whiting said:

"I'm all right. I'm not hungry."

"'Ave a fag, then."

"I wouldn't mind a fag."

Binns pushed the packet across. "You've earned that." He looked at Russell. "Can we get through, Mike?"

"Ye'."

Russell started the engine. The nearside front wheel juddered across the edge of the bricks and sent one of them winging against the wall. They drove fifty yards and came up against a fork in the street. The left way was blocked solid; the other looked clear. They took that one, and turned right at an L-section, with the feeling they were facing more south than north, that they were going back. Then the street turned, and they came to a wider road.

"Left, Mike."

"Ye'."

The Hispano swung through the corner, with steam wisping up from the radiator.

"She's boilin'."

"Let her boil."

They drove ten yards and Russell stood on the brakes. The noise, as the wall came down, was frightening. They watched it bellying, smooth as a sail in the wind; then it broke up, seeming to remain poised in the air like a great jig-saw puzzle until it collapsed, becoming a torrent that poured into the street, topped with waves of yellow dust, tiding fast and then hitting the road, bouncing with the din of a cannonade, the dust and fragments spuming high into the air while the echoes rattled through the town.

Objects stuck out from the mass of masonry: a fireplace, a bedstead, a chair, a cupboard-door. A lace curtain lay draped across the bricks, as if seeking pathetically to cover the wreckage.

Smith said, "My God, if——"

"Shut up!" Binns sat with his scalp drawn tight. The street was blocked. They were in a cul-de-sac. He tried to remember. This was the right fork. The left fork had been blocked. The only other way was back past the bricks, the woman's body and the barrow. Start again.

Russell said, "There might be——"

"They'll all be like this. Everywhere."

"Ye'."

Binns opened his door. "Get your rifles."

"Goin' to walk, Tubby?"

"Yes. Quick, now."

Russell slipped out of the driving-seat and went round to the engine, flooding the carburettor. Smith got out and took the rifles, standing them against the running-board. Binns said, "You and me carry Mills."

"You're not——"

"Shut up, Mills. Whiting, you and Russell carry the spare rifles."

They grabbed Mills as he came out of the car.

"'Ere, listen——"

"Stuff it. Arms round our necks, quick, now."

Binns and Smith began climbing the pile of bricks, with Mills slung between them, a loaf and half a sausage on his lap, his tin-hat perched on his head. Behind them, Russell threw the

rag into the back of the car. He had soaked the rag in petrol from the carburettor. Whiting watched him as he struck a match and threw it into the car. The petrol fumes lit with a dull pop. "Come on, kid."

They took the spare rifles and followed the others over the mound. Russell looked back, when he was at the top. The Hispano was well alight. She stood four-square on her wheels, sloping forward on the bare front rims, a big car with fine lines, even now. A flyer.

Russell turned round and went on down the other side of the bricks and came abreast of Whiting. They caught up with the others. Ahead of them were the flames of buildings ablaze, but the wind carried the heat and the smoke northwards, away from them.

Binns freed one hand from under Mills's knees, and picked up the half sausage. "Open your mouth, mate."

"I don't feel like——" but the end of the sausage went in, muffling the rest.

Binns said, "Eat what you can, spit out what you can't. We can't go for ever without a bite."

Russell's face split into a kind of grin, underneath the muck. "You're all right, you are, cock-o. Sittin' down in your arm-chair scoffin' your bloody dinner, while us lot have got to slog it up the——"

"Mike."

"Ye'?"

"Get on ahead. See if you can find out where that ration-truck is. They said where the road runs under the trees."

"All right." He began walking ahead with a ragged, loping stride.

Binns called, "Don't go out of sight of this road. And if you see anything on wheels that'll run, grab it."

Russell waved his left hand, and tried to get into a trot, slowing over humps of rubble and then trotting on. He had given the three rifles to Whiting. His right arm was numb, now that there was nothing to do, no steering-wheel to hold. It flapped as he stumbled forward. They saw him trip on a body, right himself and go on.

Binns said to Whiting, "Can you manage those rifles?"

"Yes." He walked doggedly, looking at the ground.

"How many are there?"

"Six."

"Drop one."

Whiting said nothing.

"You can drop one of them."

"No."

Binns said to Mills, "You feel all right?"

"Yeh. Put me down."

"You all right, Smith?"

"Fine."

"Put me down, for Chri' sake. I can walk——"

"I'll stuff that loaf in next if you don't be quiet."

The Hispano burned behind them. The houses burned ahead. Gunfire was murmuring in the north. The south was quiet, except for the rumble of the tanks, and the gun-carriers, and the infantry-transports that were rolling towards Malins-du-pont.

Russell was out of sight, beyond a slope of rubble. Binns gave a lurch, and steadied himself, shutting his eyes for a moment to stop the sky flickering. Smith broke his stride to step over a crumpled shape of cloth and bone and blood that was sticking out from the bricks. A low crooning sound was coming from Mills.

"Oh th' song o' th' birds in th' Spring, tra-la . . . th' song o' th' birds in th' Spring . . ."

Whiting walked steadily, watching the ground, carrying the five rifles in a bundle; and the sixth, Harper's.

SEVEN

RUSSELL picked his way over wreckage. There had been some kind of improvised pill-box here, just round the corner from the main street where the road ran under the trees. Someone had had the idea of digging in, at the last resort, and covering the main street with a couple of Bofors from this position. A last heroic stand. They must have been bomb-happy, putting two Bofors to hold up a tank column.

He made his way through the litter of concrete and brick-dust. One of the trees had been felled by explosive, and its trunk lay across the split pill-box, a great blunt instrument crushing a concrete skull. There were bodies here in khaki. A voice was coming from one of them, and Russell jerked his head round, trying to make out details among the appalling wreckage.

"Get me my revolver."

A thin voice, quite steady, almost normal.

Russell's eyes darted among the rubble. He wanted to ask, "Where are you?" but was fearful that a dead man would lift himself from the dust, confronting him. Russell and the others had not slept for a long time; they had not eaten for a long time; they had worked hard and their nerves had been subjected to unrelenting strain for days, weeks. And Russell had lost blood, a great deal of it. Therefore the light of the sky was never steady now, but flickered; and sounds came oddly to the ears, as if through water; and when a voice came from the midst of a mess of dead men and bricks and wreckage, you wondered how much you were imagining, how far you had come towards madness of a kind.

"Get me my revolver."

Nothing was moving. He had to inspect each man, or part of a man, that was here in the shambles. Brick-dust had come down thickly, and it was like looking for the animals in the children's puzzle picture, where some of them are upside-down, concealed in leaves and flowers.

He swallowed saliva and called, "Where are you?"
"Here."

Nothing moved. He looked towards the sound of the voice, and saw a body lying there, flung out on its face. The angle of it was grotesque; the back had been broken. The legs were beneath a great stone. "Get me my revolver."

Part of the officer's tunic was visible. His head was bare, the black hair dull with dust. Russell could see only the angle of one cheek-bone, nothing more of the face. He moved towards the shape. The light flickered. The voice came through veils. "Do as I say, damn you."

There had been movement, across the cheek-bone. This was the face that had spoken. Russell stood above it, swaying a little on the uneven bricks. He could see the revolver, jerked half-way out of the holster, its metal dull under the dust. "Quick," the cheek-bone said.

Russell bent down and took the revolver, holding it by the barrel, looking for the man's hand. It was lying wedged in the litter of stones. The other one was out of sight, buried. He held it by the barrel; but there was nothing he could hand it to. His own voice was less steady than the other's.

"I've got it."

"Then finish me off. Hurry."

Russell looked down at the body, turning the revolver so that the butt came into his hand. He moved the safety-catch off. The body said:

"What's your name?"

It was difficult to remember.

"Russell, sir."

Great effort came into the words; they were spoken against inhuman opposition, with the doggedness of an argument pitted against bitter odds. They were absurdly clear.

"I am obliged to you, Russell."

He held the revolver close to the neck, on the hairline, the border between dark hair and white skin beneath the dust-film.

"Sir."

He fired twice, and let the revolver fall. He stumbled badly,

moving away, because he was trying to move too fast; then he came down to the earth and grass at the fringe of the rubble, and looked for the ditched ration-truck. It was on its side, square in the ditch. Stones had come down, tearing through the canvas. He dropped down the grass bank and moved the stones away, looking and feeling for anything that was not a stone; but there was nothing, except a tin of salt and a few empty cartons and a forage-cap.

He came back through the ditch, avoiding the waste of bricks and the smashed pill-box, hitching himself across the tree-trunk and coming back to the street.

They had put Mills down and were waiting.

Binns said, "What were those shots, Mike?"

Whiting was sitting on the stack of rifles, resting, looking at his hands. Smith and Binns were supporting Mills.

"I didn't hear any," Russell said. "There's nothing in the ration-truck, not a bloody biscuit."

They stood there looking at him. He said to Whiting, "Up, cock-o."

Whiting got up, and Russell took three of the rifles, bunching them in the crook of his left arm. He looked at Binns. "We pushin' on?"

"Yes." They swung Mills up, and Whiting got hold of the other rifles. In silence they began walking along the road under the trees.

The guns were on their left, not far from the road. Their slender barrels were sloped south in an uneven line. One or two had swung round, their carriers tilted over. A group of trucks could be seen behind the guns, still burning. The figure of a man was floundering, a long way off; and there were voices with nothing human about them, pitching thinly into the air above the crackle of the fire.

Binns looked ahead of him along the avenue. They kept on through its tunnel of cool green light, but when they left the trees they were walking in a drift of smoke, and the heat came with it from the buildings and the trucks. Before them now was a stretch of flat country, only patches of it visible through the smoke.

Whiting stumbled and dropped a rifle, pulling himself upright with a jerk and shaking his head like a boxer. He stopped, but Binns said:

"Leave it."

They walked on, listening to Whiting behind them, struggling to pick up the rifle. Russell stopped and turned round, but Whiting had managed. In a dozen yards he had caught up with them; they heard the breath sawing in and out of his throat.

"Tubby," said Russell. "It's no good keepin' along this road."

They stopped. When they put Mills down he freed himself and lurched away from them, standing in a half-crouch.

"I'm walkin', from now on." His fists were bunched and he was watching Binns.

Binns said, "No, this road's no good, Mike."

The smoke swirled past them, and Whiting had begun coughing, snatching a breath and then coughing again, doubled over the rifles, legs splayed to support him while his body shook.

"They'll come up on us, Tubby."

"Yes." He listened, trying to pick out the rumble of the tanks from the distant gunfire. He could not hear them. "We'll go across the fields."

"Which way?"

"East." Ever since the bombing of the convoy, the land to the east had been quiet. "Mills."

"Sod yer." Mills began hobbling off the road. They followed him, coming abreast of him on the grass. His head began jerking round from one side to the other to watch them; it was as if they were stalking a wounded sparrow across the field. They left him alone, and reached ploughed land before Smith said, "Listen."

They stood with their feet sinking into the soft, moist earth. The rumbling was there now, beyond the town. The tanks were coming in.

"Yes."

Smith took some of the rifles from Whiting, and Binns moved off again. "Mills, we've got to hurry."

"I'm 'urryin'."

He was ahead of them again, hobbling with his short legs tied by the ache in his groin. Binns took two rifles and followed him, the rest keeping up. The smoke was clearer now. In front of them, to the east, was a pattern of farmland, with small buildings here and there. The horizon was formed by trees. The light was lowering, its main glare behind them from the west.

"Tubby, how long before it's dark?"

"Not long."

It was painful to watch Mills, and to hear the jerking of his breath. They tried to forget about him. The sound of the tanks was building up as it began echoing among the buildings.

Binns broke into a shambling run, grabbing Mills's arm.

"Come on, we've got to run."

Whiting said, **"I can't. I can't."**

Smith took his arm, so that they ran in pairs, Binns and Mills, Smith and Whiting, while Russell loped beside them. Their boots brought up clods of earth, slowing them, dragging at them. Nobody spoke again for a long time. There was just the sound of their harsh, dry breath, and the clatter of the tanks, and the shudder of gunfire in the north. They ran until Mills pitched forward across the ridged soil.

Russell helped Binns lift him. He was out cold. When he was slung between them, Binns said, **"Bring two rifles."** Smith dropped one of his. Whiting was bent over the others, struggling to pick them up. **"Whiting, only one."**

The kid went on struggling, the breath scraping out of his throat.

"Whiting!"

He was choking, trying to say, **"No, no."** He didn't know which was Harper's, which was Harper's; they were all alike.

Binns let go of Mills and hit Whiting hard across the face, knocking him down over the rifles. **"Get up, and bring one. One."**

Smith took Mills's dangling arm and went off with Russell, carrying him. Binns came behind, breaking into his run again

when he saw that Whiting had got up and was coming, with one rifle. They ran, leaving the ploughed field and coming upon pasture, running more easily over the tufts and hummocks, one of them sometimes going down, but coming on again. The light flickered above them; the grass jumped, tilting and hitting them, falling away as they found their feet again. They saw the green of the bumping grass, and the fluttering light. They heard nothing but the air rasping in their throats. They felt nothing but the rough, treacherous ground that eddied round their feet.

Whiting went down next and did not get up. Vaguely it occurred to Binns to stop. He slung Whiting across his back, and ran on with the weight pressing down on him and the ground pressing up. They were trying to shut him like a pen-knife, the weight and the ground. He ran with his eyes shut, until his legs went splaying and he had to open his eyes and straighten up. The others were in front of him: Russell and Smith jogging along with Mills between them, head lolling; he could not see Harper; where was Harper?

They ran for five miles, like this; five men, three of them conscious.

Pannet, who was smoking a cigarette at the top of the dug-out, said:

"Ken."

"What?" Froome poked his head up. He could see Pannet silhouetted against the drained grey of the sundown.

"Someone coming."

Froome came up the sandbag-steps, as stealthily as a badger emerging from its sett to sniff at the dusk.

"Where?"

"Over there. Two or three."

Froome picked up one of the rifles. "I don't think they're Jerries, ol' boy."

"Fifth-column, p'r'aps." Pannet took the other rifle. They slipped the catches off. A soft breeze was flowing over the fields, and soon it carried the sound of the men who were coming: the drum of their feet on the turf, the dry scrape of their breath.

Pannet murmured, "Let 'em go by, if they don't see us."

"They're coming straight for us. They'll pitch down the frigging hole."

"They won't, you know." Pannet raised his rifle, sighting. Froome brought his up, level. The men ran towards them, an odd shapeless tableau. Pannet called:

"*Hult!*"

One of the men, who carried another on his back, dropped forward and his load went toppling down. The other two slowed in their run, and then stopped, putting the man they carried on to the grass.

Pannet and Froome kept their rifles level, and walked towards the group. The light was still quite good. They could see that the men wore khaki, and that they had no fight in them.

The rifles were lowered. Safety-catches were moved back.

Binns had got on to his feet. His lips were drawn back from his teeth as if he were having to stare against strong light as he looked at the strangers. They were in blue uniform.

Russell said, "The bloody Raff!" and went on panting like a bellows, painfully.

"Who are you?" asked Froome.

"The bloody Army," said Russell, and fell down without even a hand moving to break his fall. His shoulder hit the grass and he lay still.

Pannet looked down at him with his mouth open.

"Christ. Has he been shot?"

Binns said, "No, he's tired. We all are."

Froome had been staring at these people. He said to Pannet, "Look, we'd better do something. Get 'em inside, m'm?"

"Yes."

They took Russell by his feet and shoulders and carried him to the top of the sandbags, and down the steps. Binns, only just on the edge of consciousness, watched them take Russell away, and felt vaguely they were lowering him into some kind of grave. Between deep spasms of breath, Binns was saying, "He's not dead, he's not dead." He was still standing here, swaying on his feet, when they came back, appearing from

the ground in front of him. He said, "He's not dead."

"No, he's okay."

Smith was bent over, hands on knees, getting his breath back. The two L.A.C.s picked up Mills and took him into the dug-out. Then they came back for Whiting. Binns followed them, this time, to see where they were going. He slipped on the sandbag-steps and landed at the bottom. He sat there not attempting to move. Some kind of light was flickering ahead of him, and shapes bobbed about.

"Corp, are you all right?"

It was Smith, coming down the steps behind him.

"Yes." He got up and hit the wall with his shoulder, looking at Smith. "Tanks di'n't get us. Di'n't get us."

"No. We're all right."

"Hey." Froome came up behind Binns, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Come and put your head down, skipper."

He led Binns into the main dug-out. There were two lamps made of cocoa-tins, with wicks burning in paraffin. Tin-hats hung on the wall. A mirror. Greatcoats. Groundsheets. A shroud of camouflage-netting.

"Down here," said Froome. There were sacks spread on the earth. Mills and Whiting and Russell were laid out beside each other. Binns looked down at them, trying to think what had happened. Just now they had been bumping across the fields with the wind in their faces and the sky darkening behind them. Now they were here. Where was here?

"What?" he said.

"Lie down."

Smith was on the sacks curled up, head on one arm.

Binns asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm Froome. This is Pannet. We're down here taking a breather till things blow over, or something happens. Look, skipper, you just put your bonce down and take it easy. Sleep as long as you like—we'll be here keeping a look-out."

"Jerry's over there."

"Where?"

"The town. East." He swayed. Froome held him. "No, west."

"That's five miles away. We're all right down here."

"Five what?"

"Miles, ol' boy."

"No." His eyelids drooped. He was trying to lift his head and think. "We've jus' lef' there. Tanks."

"Look, you lie down there. We'll see to everything else."

Binns turned his head in a low swing and looked at the lamps. His eyes began streaming with water, and he shut them. As Froome and Pannet lifted him and lowered him gently on to the sacking, he lost consciousness at last.

They straightened up.

"My oath," Pannet murmured, "they're well on their knees, eh?"

"Poor bastards. Who'd be a bloody Brown-job?"

They went slowly back to the steps, and climbed them. The dusk was down and the few prominent shapes of hedge and bush and barn were turning black, standing out against the last seep of light above the west horizon. The air moved coolly across the land. A long way off, the flames were dying, among the roofs of the town. In the north the barrage had stopped, but the sky was murmuring as bombers prowled in flocks. A skeleton of searchlight beams was propped in the dark, and ack-ack shells were pricking the night with orange.

"Know any first-aid?" Pannet asked.

"A fraction."

They lit cigarettes, shielding the flame of the match. They had eaten well, an hour ago, and sat here feeling smug and feeling lucky. But they missed the others. When the Sound Ranging Battery had struck camp, the R.A.F. Meteor Unit had gone with them, leaving their lines out and abandoning their equipment, on orders.

"I suppose we're a couple of prats," said Pannet, thoughtfully.

"Course we are. Never mind."

They sat in silence for a long time, watching the fire in the west and the bigger ones in the north. The cone of searchlights was leaning over, its bright struts shortening on one side, lengthening on the other, as it craned to follow an unseen flock of planes. Froome said:

"That'll be up near Calais, somewhere."

"Yes."

"Short cry from home."

"Yes." Pannet began thinking of home, the smart little flat in South Ken, too smart, too little, not really a home. She wouldn't be there now. The last letter had said she was moving to the country. The lying bitch.

Froome murmured, "Look, I think they're probably right, you know. About Jerry being in the town over there. If he is, we're practically behind the enemy lines."

"Cheerful," Pannet said.

"Well, we've got to face it, ol' boy."

"There aren't any lines, as far as I can see. If Jerry's there, he'll go up that road, north. He won't spread out across country."

"You can look at it which way you like; we'll still be behind him."

Pannet said, "Well, we can push on tomorrow."

"Not by daylight."

"Tomorrow night, then."

"What about this lot?"

"What lot?"

"These blokes."

"Take 'em with us." Pannet leaned his head back on a sand-bag. He was interested in keeping alive, and keeping out of German hands; but he stopped there; he didn't think beyond that, about England. He wanted to stay in France. Some of the chaps in the unit had said they were pulling out of France, the lot of them, the whole Army. Others had been told they were withdrawing north to re-form their lines while more equipment was shipped across to them. He believed this last rumour because he wanted to believe it. That was easier; you couldn't know which was true, yet.

Froome said in a little while, "I suppose we'd better get some more sleep, hadn't we?"

"I'm not worried."

"All the same, we'd better. Have to take it in shifts, one of us keep look-out."

"I'm easy. You go down."

"Fair enough." Froome stood up, taking a last look at the night.

When he had gone down the sagging steps, Pannet lit another cigarette and sat comfortably with narrowed eyes. Sometimes he turned his head, hearing the drone loudening above, then diminishing. The ground began trembling after a time, and he could see new fires starting on the horizon, and a whole bright flower-bed of ack-ack blossom, blooming in the dark.

Below him, in the dug-out, someone was coughing; then the sound stopped. The breeze was cool on his face, pulling the cigarette-smoke away from his mouth in skeins. He was thinking about the flat again now, with the mural, the black panther that Mathieson had done for a Christmas present. Had a talent, Mathieson, a true talent; he knew how to use paint, and women.

She wouldn't have gone to the country. That was merely her curious sense of protecting him. She couldn't help his knowing that, wherever she was, she was with Mathieson; but she wanted him to think they weren't there at the flat. She thought it might make him feel better, to think the flat was empty, that the bed wasn't being used. It was odd, how important the marital bed was always held. It would figure in the divorce. It figured now, in her mind. Women were bed-conscious from the moment they reached puberty; it was the symbol for all jealousy, vanity, sacrifice, sufferance and duty. Seldom for pleasure: that would be frivolous. So now it was all right. He needn't really feel hurt or angry. She was away in the country, and there was nobody in the bed, not *that* bed.

He dropped the cigarette-end, and thought only of the things he saw: the fires, the shell-bursts, the searchlights. If a party of Jerries came across the fields, foraging or deploying, he must see them before they saw him. The two lamps would have to be out, and there must be silence down there, if Jerry came past.

He stood up, leaning against the rotten fence that half-screened the mouth of the dug-out, and kept his watch.

The tanks went up soon after midnight along the road to the north. Froome was wakened by their noise, and came up to look.

"What's that, Bob?"

"Tanks."

"Jerry?"

"Yep. And guns."

They stood watching the fragile trail of lights; the column steered by their pale gleam, strung out from the town to the knoll of trees. Men were singing, a rhythmic, melodic grunt of sound, over-emphatic about its virility.

"Cocky bastards," Froome said, "using lights and making that row."

"They're winning the war."

"They've got a mucking hope."

The column had the distant sound of an express train, although it must be moving slowly in the dark. It went on for half an hour; then the quiet came back.

"So here we are," Froome said cheerfully, "behind the enemy lines. You speak any German at all?"

"How are those chaps down there, Ken?"

"Sleeping their heads off. Two of 'em snore. They'll be all right in the morning."

He stayed for another half-hour, offered to take his spell of duty, and went below again when Pannet said he wasn't sleepy. Pannet lit a cigarette and felt alone again, more alone than he had been since he was born.

Froome cooked for them all, while they were washing in the cattle-trough on the other side of the fence. The smell of frying filled the dug-out, turning their stomachs over with the sickness of emptiness. They shaved, after a fashion, using the two razors belonging to the L.A.C.s. Nothing could be done about their uniforms; they had to put them on again, stiffened with dirt. But they looked different, and felt better.

Russell had passed a bad night, waking fitfully a dozen times; but he ate two fried eggs and some toast, as each of them did.

Smith asked Froome, "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"We brought it with us. We were away on a little informal party when our chaps pulled out. Couple of French girls had the run of a small cellar—everything you could think of from red wine to Benedictine. We were sloshed when we got back, and the bird had flown. We couldn't care less, at the time." He handed round the cigarettes. "You chaps have had it a bit on the rough side, haven't you?"

"A bit," said Binns. Binns felt in good shape this morning. The only thing that worried him was that the tanks had gone north. If other columns had moved up, east of here, they were in a pocket. They would have to hurry now, all the way. He asked Pannet, "D'you know anything about the war—what's happening generally?"

"We had a portable radio, but we left it behind. The last we heard was that Belgium's packed it in. That was at midnight, the night before last."

"Belgium," nodded Binns.

"Yep. Today's the 29th. The B.E.F. is fighting its way back to the coast, under attack from south, east and west, repulsing by day, withdrawing by night. The situation was described by some official joker as 'fluid'."

"They meant organised chaos," Froome said, pouring hot water on to the coffee. "I can't promise this stuff's going to taste any more pleasant than pump-water, because we're short of so many little things that make up a cosy home. I've put the teeniest pinch of carbolic in, because the water's rancid, and we mustn't take any chances, must we?"

Russell was watching him in mild horror. He said in a moment, "Don't worry about me, I'm not thirsty."

Froome stirred the coffee, energetic, competent. His large round face was thoughtful. "You're not going to disappoint me, surely? Here am I, slaving over a hot stove all day, and you calmly say you don't want any." He poured out a mugful and handed it to Russell, who accepted it with suspicion.

Pannet said, "It'll be good coffee, don't worry. This man drools, that's all."

Froome poured out another mugful and gave it to Whiting. He had picked out Whiting as a man who wanted

some looking-after. An odd kid, knotted up with worry.

Pannet was leaning against the earth wall, surveying the morning scene with satisfaction. All the stores had been used up in one go, but these chaps had needed the grub, and he was quietly glad it had been here for them. Binns was watching him. Pannet had a long sloping face with pale eyes that were slightly protuberant. He was twenty-four, maybe less. He grinned easily, less at anything funny than at the mention of death or disaster. Partly it was a defence, deeply habitual; partly he was genuinely amused by chaos, because chaos brought dignity to the ground, and that was the core of most English humour: the debunking of pomp. Pannet would sit straight-faced and bored to the back teeth watching a comedian in comic clothes, but when a man walked into a brick wall, reading his paper, Pannet would curl up on the spot. He had extended this sense of the ridiculous to take in tragedy, so that when they had seen the bomber come vertically to the earth and explode, he had not been triumphant because it was a German plane, nor shocked because it was a violent end to a handful of humans, nor sorry for them. He had laughed, because it was ridiculous. That plane had been meant to fly horizontally, and it had come down vertically. It had been trying to kill the British, and it had killed Germans; and all that grim concentration in getting the thing into the air with all its bombs loaded up and its compass set on course had ended in a most surprising bang. Pannet had laughed until his officer had snapped out, "Haven't you any decency, man?"

But death and disaster was only, after all, a man walking into a brick wall reading his paper. Froome could never see this, but then, nobody could. Only Pannet.

He drank his coffee, when the mugs were passed round. It was palatable. He noticed the tall chap with the blood-stained battle-dress was looking more cheerful, and watching Froome, trying to make him out. A lot of people reacted in this way to Froome. You couldn't see Froome as he was when Pannet had first met him in civvies, before the war: a bouncing bar-fly with a white M.G. full of show-girls, a fond mother and an overdraft. You couldn't imagine him like that, because he

had changed, in a few short months. Sometimes Pannet tried to imagine him as he would be after the war, if he got through with his skin; and he couldn't. The change was going on under the surface, while the surface remained the same. It was an interesting metamorphosis to watch; and Pannet was interested in people. He was interested in the thin kid they called Whiting, and in the tough-looking little corporal. He leaned against the earth-wall, watching them.

Froome was talking to the corporal now.

"Are you chaps making for anywhere special, skipper?"

"Yes. The coast."

"What happens, once you get there?"

"We're rejoining our units. Those are the orders."

Pannet watched Binns. It seemed a long time ago when people had talked about orders.

"How d'you aim to reach there?"

"Walk."

"It's about twenty miles."

"Yes."

Froome sat at ease on an ammo-box, hands cupped, listening to Binns with a doctor's attitude, attentively.

"What d'you think your chances are of getting through to the coast?"

"I don't know. It didn't occur to me."

Again Pannet glanced towards Binns.

Froome said, "When we first found this place and dug in, we were thinking of hanging about till the tide turned. I mean you can't do much, with everyone running like hell."

"If you don't run too, you're risking being taken prisoner."

"I suppose so," Froome nodded.

Pannet was also watching Smith, the dark one with the brooding face. Smith hadn't said very much. He didn't look very interested in anything; but it seemed like the disinterest of a man out of his element, rather than that of subjection to a bad situation, or fear, or despair: the kid called Whiting was different; his disinterest had those things in it, fear and despair. Whiting was floundering on, geared to a machine that was running amok; but Smith was keeping in step with his mind a

long way off. Pannet would not have been surprised if Smith suddenly stood up and said, "Well, I've got to be going, now," and wandered off, never to be heard of again.

Froome was thinking of what Binns had said, about the risk of capture. He had been brushing this thought aside for a long time now, because his mind habitually fought shy of the worst. The alternative was to walk twenty miles to the coast through a crumbling world, and that seemed just as hopeless. Froome was suspended in a delusion: that the tide would turn, that everyone would muddle through. Talking to the corporal, he was being made to think in terms of reality. His mother had said, "But you can't go on just being a student for ever, my dear." Why not? Being a student was very pleasant. It was very pleasant here, down in the dug-out, away from the war, and the confusion. He resented Binns, but knew he was right. He got up from the box and said:

"Bob, what about it?"

Pannet shrugged. He wanted to stay in France. This was France.

Binns talked in a low voice to Russell.

"You didn't sleep much, did you, Mike?"

"Me? Slept wonderful."

"How d'you feel?"

"Feel fine."

"We've got to push on."

"Ye'. Say the word, cock-o."

Mills said, "You know what we want?"

"What?"

"A few 'orses. Then we could——"

"Oh, for Chri' sake——"

"Well, what's wrong wi' that?" He was very serious, and angry with them. "On an 'orse, you could get to th' coast in a coupler hours. Sloggin' it, you got a two-day sweat. Wha's so bleedin' funny about an 'orse, then?"

"Nothing," said Binns, "but there aren't any available, that's all."

"Besides, you'd never ride one, cock-o, after what you did to your crutch yesterday."

"Me, not ride an 'orse?"

Whiting sat near the steps, hands on knees.

Smith was talking to Froome. "I've got a brother in the Raff."

"That so? What's he doing?"

"Pilot, on Spits."

"Where's he stationed?"

"Kent."

"Might see something of him, ol' boy. It's about time we saw something of our own kites."

Russell said, "You'll be lucky. I haven't see one since we were in Brussels, except for the odd Lysander, spotting."

Froome shrugged. He detected a serious note in Russell's tone. "They're probably holding them in reserve, ol' boy."

"Those that got back, maybe. Christ, we've only got a handful of planes, just like the Army's only got a handful of equipment. You know what rifles we were using? Nineteen-bloody-eighteen, cock-o—Enfields!"

Froome shrugged again. It was somebody else's headache. This dug-out full of men was the result of the headache: the cause was a long way off, somewhere in Whitehall, or Birmingham or Coventry.

"You seen an angry German yet?"

They turned and looked at Mills

Pannet said, "No. Have you?"

"Nah."

Pannet said, "I don't want to, either." He looked at Froome. Froome said:

"No. Especially the S.S. divisions."

There was an odd silence. They were all interested in the Germans: the men themselves; because for weeks they had been harried by the enemy, beaten back by him, their mates killed by him and captured by him: yet they had never seen him. This was a modern war, a campaign of its time; and its time was the scientific epoch of the internal-combustion engine. The sound of those engines was in the air now, above them in the sky. Transport and tanks and guns had moved past them during the night, changing the arrows on the map, changing

the future of these few men and of England itself. But no one here had seen an angry German yet.

"What about the S.S. divisions?" Binns asked.

Pannet stubbed out his cigarette-end and without looking up he said, "We had a report in. It was a report, not a rumour, and we weren't meant to know about it. The S.S. Totenkopf Division surrounded a house where there were a hundred men of the Second Royal Norfolk, and took them prisoner. A lot of them were wounded, and they'd been fighting hard for a long time."

Whiting sat by the steps, hands on his knees. His head was turned, and he was watching Pannet.

"The S.S. boys disarmed them and searched them, then made them march in single file past a wall. The wall of a barn. There was a low ditch under the wall. There were a couple of machine-guns, three hundred yards away. When our chaps were marching past the wall, the machine-guns mowed them down, and they fell into the ditch."

Whiting watched him, with no expression in his face. He might have been looking at anything, a tree, a door. Nothing showed that he was listening, or that what he heard made any difference to him.

Russell murmured, "Christ."

"There weren't many left alive," Pannet said. "Those that were they shot or bayoneted in the ditch. Two survived, and got away. Our unit got the report through one of the Battery D.R.s. He'd seen the two men."

Mills was looking at the floor, then he glanced up at Binns, perhaps to see what Binns was thinking. Binns said:

"So that's what they're like."

"I imagine the S.S. are the worst bastards," Froome said.

Smith said, "The S.S. are Germans, aren't they?"

Whiting had turned his head, and was gazing at the sand-bags again.

Russell was tidying the bandages on his arm. "Tubby, we goin' to push on?"

"Yes."

Pannet gave a grin, one of his easy grins; but this had been

one thing he couldn't manage to laugh about, the men marching past the wall. His grin now was about Russell, who wanted to push on.

"In daylight?" Froome asked. "You going to push on in daylight?"

Binns said, "Well, it's twenty miles, and we can't hang about here, behind the lines." He looked at his own party. "You blokes fit?"

"Ye'."

"I'm ready," said Mills.

Smith nodded. Whiting looked up, and said:

"We've got no rifles."

"We've got our boots," said Russell. "That's all we'll need, my puck-o."

Binns looked at the two L.A.C.s. "What about you—are you staying on?"

"Us?" Froome said, playing for time. Pannet remained leaning against the wall. Froome looked at him. "What about it, Bob?"

"I'm easy."

"I think we should go."

"Fair enough." Pannet stood away from the wall.

Russell said warmly, "Join up with us. We'll look after you. Christ, you've looked after us all right."

"A treat," Mills said quickly.

"Saved our bacon——"

"If it hadn't been for you——"

Froome said, "Oh, plurals." Pannet was clattering about with the tin mugs, and Froome slung his webbing down from the wall. Binns said:

"If you'd rather go off on your own. . . . It might be easier, just the two of you."

Froome turned his head. "Can we join up with you, skipper?"

"You'd be welcome. Put it like that."

"Fair enough. We can leave this mess for Jerry to sort over."

They began moving about, finding what few things they

had. Binns stood over Whiting and murmured, "You all right, kid?"

"Yes, Corp." He got up, hands hanging by his sides. His face was smooth, his eyes calm. He looked untouched by the last eighteen days. He had changed, even since Binns had known him. He supposed they were all changing, coming out of their shells or going into them, their qualities or their faults rising to the surface or sinking deep, each of them reacting in his different way, according to his own unique structure of glands, hormones, brain-cells, nerve-system, emotional plexus. All of them changing, being forced to change by the conflicting pressures and tensions of a life nearer death than any other: the war-life, where values became inverted, heightened or devalued until a man was faced with a blue-print for living that was almost indecipherable.

Binns did not feel he was changing, himself. He did not believe that Mike Russell was changing. Smith was; Whiting was; Mills, in a small measure. He did not know anything about the two L.A.C.s.

He said to Whiting, "It's only twenty miles now. With a bit more luck, we can be in Blighty soon."

"I'm all right," Whiting said.

Binns left him. He thought the biggest and most violent change, with this kid, had happened when Harper had been killed.

Froome was stuffing a bottle into his ration-bag.

"Benedictine," he said. "Fancy putting a bottle of Benedictine into a frigging ration-bag. It ought to be slipped into silk, wrapped in gold-leaf, put on board a Rolls-Royce and driven down the Mall with an escort of Household Cavalry." He slung his webbing carefully. "When that cork comes out, I'll be in England, my brothers."

Russell was standing next to Smith. He muttered, "That puck-o's a bit mad, isn' he?"

Smith murmured, "Yes. We all are."

"All right?" Binns called.

They came out to the steps, and waited there while Binns climbed them and stood at the top, looking round in the bright

morning light. The sun was an aching blob, behind a scum of cloud that was already breaking up. He could see the roofs of Malins-du-pont. The church spire was still standing; only here and there did the roofs look broken and blackened. The line of poplars ran north from the town, and he could make out the roadway beyond them. Nothing was moving along the road. The west looked deserted, except for a pall of smoke that was hanging along the horizon.

In the south sky two spotter-planes were nosing idly, not much higher than the hilltops. That was enemy country now, and the planes were looking for strongholds that might contain a garrison. Northwards from here the land ran flat, its great expanse fenced off by lines of poplars; but it was not quiet there. The drone of day-bombers was constant, and flak was in the sky, black puffs of it poppling in clusters, fading to grey and vanishing, replaced by more. A barrage was hammering, slightly to the west of north, where Calais would lie; it trembled in the earth, here where Binns stood.

He looked eastwards, and saw the land broken up with a tumble of small hills and the tufted heads of woods. There was a road running due north, losing itself among the hills and trees, coming in sight again. There was movement along the road. He watched for minutes, until Russell came up.

"What's it like, cock-o?"

Binns pointed. "What would you say that stuff is, Mike?"

Russell screwed up his eyes in the morning glare.

"Froggies. Refugees."

"Not with those wagons."

"That's true. They're military transport. Maybe Scammels." He gave a grunt. "Scammels or Mercedes—can't tell, can we?"

The others came up the steps.

"Those are refugees in front, going into that wood."

"But it's Army stuff behind."

"No guns——"

"Army transport, though."

Binns said, "We'll make north, across country, and veer that way a bit, till we can see what they are."

Russell watched the distant road for another few moments and said, "Ye'. Come on, then."

They left the dug-out, going through the rotten fence, pairing up or walking alone. Their future seemed simple enough. It was ten o'clock on the morning of May 29th. They were setting out for the coast.

EIGHT

AFTER a few miles the landscape changed. Smoke began drifting low across the fields: somewhere along the road fires had been started; but there had been no planes in the area.

"Dumping equipment," Binns said. "Burning it."

"They're British, then." Russell was walking beside him.

"Or French."

The smoke thickened, moving towards them as the wind played, moving away again. A rattling came, of machine-gun bullets, but they could not tell whether guns were being fired or whether ammo was going off among the dumped equipment. The Army transport might be spraying a burst over the heads of the refugees in front of them, trying to clear the road.

There were men moving across the fields on this side of the road. an ill-defined rabble that might have been civilians or the remnant of a fighting-troop, running north. They were leaving wagons behind them on fire.

Russell said, "Look at that lot, Tubby."

"Yes. French Army. Horse-drawn——"

"But look at that wagon, cock-o. On fire, an' goin' like the wind——"

He broke off as Mills began shouting. He was shouting gibberish, doubling into a crouched run, shouting a string of filth as he ran, hobbled by his bad ankle and the residue of pain in his groin, but running hard.

"What the hell's up with him, for God's sake?"

They slowed, watching him as he left them, running ahead. Then Smith began running too. "Those wagons are still horsed!"

"They're what?" called Pannet. Smith followed Mills, outstripping him. The rest of them broke into a run, and Russell said:

"Christ! Horses still in the shafts an' roastin'!"

They all ran hard now, passing Mills as they reached the fields where most of the wagons were. Mills had stopped cursing. He was sobbing in his throat as he ran.

Russell was there first, at the nearest wagon. It was ablaze at the rear and the horse was standing erect in fright, quivering. Russell got out his knife and hacked at the straps, freeing the left shaft and dodging under the neck as the horse reared and then broke into a run. Russell got a grip on the right shaft and hacked at the leather, dragged along bodily until the strap parted. He was flung headlong, with a shower of sparks spilling across him as the wagon overturned. The horse ran on, free. He rolled over on the grass, snuffing the sparks out and then standing up.

Mills was being dragged along by a big chestnut mare, with flames from the wagon whipping behind in the wind-rush. Pannet was raising his rifle; the shot cracked thinly; the horse crumpled; there was nothing left of the wagon but a skeleton of embers and half a wheel; it must have been one of the first to be fired. Another shot sounded as Froome took aim, the sound half-lost in the scream of the horse; the scream stopped; but there were others, rising in a pitiful chorus. It was the sound of pain, pure, and primitive, and hideous.

Smith was staggering across the grass, holding his head. Blood was brightening his hands. A hoof had caught him. Mills had freed the big chestnut, and was throwing himself at another horse that stood with legs splayed and neck straight, the long head lifted, the scream coming, the eyes white, the flames crackling above the wagon. Mills, dwarfed by the animal, worked with his hands alive. Whiting had been kicked, and was dragging himself up from the grass, shaking his head and calling something. A shot came as Froome reached another wagon that was almost burned-out; the bullet was hardly necessary, but it went in.

Of all the impressions that were forced into these men's minds during this little time, the worst was one of smell, of the roasted flesh. And when they had finished, they did not come together for a while. Froome was sitting on a grass bank, his rifle across his knees. Near him was Pannet. Smith was holding his head, keeping one hand pressed there. Binns was standing still, looking about him, a short brown scarecrow figure, one sleeve burned away at the shoulder. Russell was

bent over, vomiting. Whiting was standing up, thin and bewildered and alone. And there was Mills. Mills was in the middle of the field, standing in a slight crouch. No one was near enough to see anything of his face; but Binns watched him, and knew that he had changed, in the last few minutes, as violently as Whiting had changed when he had seen Harper killed under the welter of bricks. Both men were much older now. People would wonder, years after this, about the way Whiting would shrink into his shell, seemingly for no reason. They would wonder why Mills was so hateful of the French: not only of these few Frenchmen who had fired the wagons according to the dictates of a retreat, leaving the horses in their shafts according to the dictates of a cruel indifference, but of all Frenchmen, all France. They would think Mills was bigoted, burdened by a grudge; and he would be both; it would be one of the worst aspects of his character, a new aspect, indestructible. This change would be permanent. War could bring out the worst in a good man, and leave much of him bad. From war great deeds spring, and men discover themselves killing each other; there is heroism; there are moments of exaltation, in victory or in a moment when man seems to have a soul, if he can do this thing for a brother-in-arms, that thing for his officer, make a sacrifice of this high order for his country's sake. But the face of war, even when it smiles, is filthy and foul of breath, sick in its bloodied body, a besotted thing that sprawls in the memory years after it has gone, leaving the stink and the stain.

Here lay the essence of it: a strewn litter of burned flesh and the echoes of agony; and it was no better because these were only horses, and not men; no better because the French soldiers did this, and not the German. This was a thing of war, and it stank of it.

Mills stood there, in the middle of the field, turning his head sometimes but not otherwise moving, and they did not go near him.

Binns went slowly over to Russell.

"Hello, cock-o."

"You all right, Mike?"

"Ye'. Ye'. You catch your shoulder?"

"Not badly. Cloth smouldered away; I was too busy to feel it."

Russell looked at the shoulder and said, "It doesn' look too good, you know."

"I'll put something on it later. We'd better go and help Smith."

"What about Mills?"

"Leave him alone."

"Ye'."

They walked across the grass. The wagons were still burning, some of them fiercely; but the horses near them were dead, and the others had gone.

Smith's arm was bright with blood. Under his clamped hand was a handkerchief, soaked. He raised his eyes to look at them as they came up.

Binns said, "Is it still bleeding, Smithy?" Any question would do. He wanted to know if the man could think and talk.

"No. It's stopped. I'm all right."

Russell said, "You've opened a vein. Must have."

Whiting came across to them. His battle-dress blouse had been ripped to the ribs, but there was no blood.

"You okay, Smithy?"

"Yes. You?"

Binns was trying to tear the cloth from one trouser-leg, and Russell gave him his knife. They managed to hack a long strip from ankle to thigh. The two L.A.C.s came up and dropped their rifles, helping to support Smith while Binns made a light tourniquet, over the soaked handkerchief. Then they cut another strip and bound it over the first one. They worked in the smell that was wafting over the field, a harsh, sickening smell.

Binns said, "We'll get to the road now. That transport is either French or British."

They helped Smith to stand up. Russell said, "Put your arm round my shoulder, cock-o."

Whiting said, "You can't walk."

"Leave me alone; I'm okay."

Mills was among them, suddenly; they had not seen him come up. He was looking at Smith's bandage. He looked no different, except that his eyes flinched as he spoke.

"What 'appened to you?"

"Nothing. We're getting to the road." Smith began walking away, holding the bandage, keeping pressure on the soaked pad.

Mills walked after him, in a slow, steady hobble. He did not glance up once, until they were nearing the road. Binns watched him a lot of the time, talking to Russell and Froome. Pannet and Whiting were behind.

Russell said, **"Ol' Mills didn't take it so bad after all."**

"Didn't he?" asked Binns.

"Well, he doesn't look very wild."

"No, he doesn't look it. Might be all right."

The morning became noisier as they neared the road. Upwards of five hundred refugees were strung out, heavily loaded and pushing or pulling barrows and carts. There was more property among these people than there had been among the other column. Some of the barrows were large enough to be horse-drawn; two or three men were harnessed in the shafts of a farm-cart; a donkey was trotting, its grey hide bobbing among the dark, loping men.

Binns's party stopped, gathered closely within a few yards of the road.

Mills was standing next to Froome. He said to Froome:

"I'll carry yer rifle, mate."

Binns turned his head and looked at Mills. Mills was watching the people on the road, the women; he was waiting for a woman to laugh, and Binns knew it.

Froome said, **"It's all right, ol' boy."**

"Let me carry it."

Mills was staring up at the people.

"No, it's okay."

"Go on."

Binns murmured to Pannet, **"Don't let Mills have a rifle. Tell Froome."**

Pannet moved among them. Binns said sharply:

"All right—when the transport comes by, join up with it. And don't forget, we'll be under orders again."

The refugees were crowding past now, as they were chivvied by the British transport. An officer was shouting through a megaphone in French, red with anger. A group of N.C.O.s were running among the rearguard of the refugees, gesturing, trying to push the barrows to the roadside, being repulsed by a mob of shrill-voiced women, attacking again while the officer bellowed in English:

"Tell 'em we'll open fire if they don't bloody-well shift!"

Smoke was drifting across the road, from equipment burning in the fields and from the wagons the French soldiers had fired. The smoke went tangling among the refugees, and many were coughing.

The officer was standing on the roof of a Bedford lorry, over the driving-cab, and now he swung round and bellowed through the megaphone:

"Sarn't Jackson—give 'em a burst!"

He ducked down and lay on the cab-roof, waiting.

Down the line of trucks a voice passed on the order.

A flame stabbed from the roof of a scout-car; the rattle shivered the air; the bullets were going high, to clear the lorry in front. With the rattle came the scream of the refugees. Many of them went darting from the road, tumbling over the grass; but this happened towards the front of the column, where they could not hear the officer shouting, and did not realise it was the British opening fire to scare them. Those at the rear raised their voices, but none ran from the road. Behind them were a dozen trucks, lorries, 3-tonners, 30-cwts. and P.U.s leading two searchlight-lorries and a generator. At the rear came a motley of P.U.s, staff-cars, scout-cars, motor-cycles and a few commandeered Citroën saloons, their roofs smothered with camouflage-leaves and branches.

Standing by the roadside, Russell said:

"Jesus, what a turn-up, eh?"

Binns said, "If Jerry sees this lot, from above, he'll wipe it out, clean."

Mills was watching the officer and the N.C.O.s who were trying to shift the rearguard mob.

"What are they?" Smith asked. His hand was clamped to his head. His left arm was caked with darkening blood, but the flow had stopped.

"God knows," Pannet grunted. "All sorts."

"The remnant of the B.E.F.," said Binns, and Russell glanced at him.

"What, cock-o?"

Binns did not answer. He was watching Mills. Mills was running over the grass towards the rearguard of the foot-column. When he reached the roadway where the N.C.O.s were working at the rabble in vain, he began shouting. It was impossible to make out many words; most of it was invective. He was shouting at the French, running among them, until for a moment Binns and the others lost sight of him. But they were clearing away suddenly; and suddenly closed up again.

"What's he at, for Chri' sake?"

"God knows——"

"He'll get half-killed, if he——"

"Look . . ."

Mills was smashing out at faces, bodies, arms, both hands bunched and hammering. He did not see what he hit. Men, women, boys; he did not know. The women were screaming. Men were trying to knock him down. Some of them were tripping over people who had fallen, knocked down by Mills, and they themselves fell, so that the leading vehicle had to slow, and then pull up. The N.C.O.s were bewildered, and stood watching. The officer was shouting again, in English.

"Get that man! Sling 'im inside this truck!"

A corporal and a sergeant went for him, but the sergeant was knocked down as he got within striking distance; the corporal tackled Mills at the waist, himself set upon by several frenzied women whose hands clawed at his face.

Binns called out, "Come on. Get Mills."

They ran up to the roadway. It was not possible to plan any clear means of reaching Mills. It was possible only to plunge in, scatter the men and women, and grab him, with the help of

the remaining N.C.O.s. He was still hitting out. Pannet caught a glimpse of his face. It was bloodless and puckered, the eyes sunk deep into the white flesh. His mouth was loose, running with saliva. Sounds were grunting out of it; they were not words. Then Pannet went down and got his legs.

Five of them dragged him clear with a pack of refugees swaying along with him; some were trying to attack him; the others were caught up in the mêlée and were themselves being dragged to the grass along with him. Then two of the N.C.O.s bundled him out like a rugger-ball, and dodged with him to the rear of the truck. He was unconscious before he reached it and was slung inside. Some of the Frenchmen tried to follow, but were held back by a line of Tommies with linked arms. Binns had his cheek opened by knuckles. Smith was slumped against the front wheel of the truck. The major on top of the driving-cab was calling to his sergeant. The refugees were shouting, their fists raised; one man was clambering over the bonnet, trying to kick the windscreen in; a lance-jack had him by the legs, and brought him down.

A sound was permeating the strange chorus of voices: a loudening throb in the sky. Faces were lifted as people looked up, and saw the planes. Bombers, at three-squadron strength, were crossing from the west, very high, in perfect formation.

The major was watching the road. Between here and the rear of the refugee-column was a gap, for the main column had pressed on when the rearguard had been caught up in the struggle with Mills. The major was conscious, more than anything else, of the bombers. They were not coming down to attack, but they were a reminder. At any moment, a sortie of Stukas or M.E.s could strike here and wipe out the convoy. He came plunging down from the roof of the cab, dropping on to the road and shouting to the driver.

"We're going through, you understand? Drive on, and don't stop for anything—*anything*."

The M.T. corporal looked through the windscreen. In front of the truck was a crowd of men and women, facing him. Before Mills had come, the refugees had not been concerned with stopping the convoy; they had been concerned only with

keeping on the road with their families, their children, their property, their cows, goats, dogs. Now they were hostile, forcing the convoy to remain halted.

A barrow was tipped over on the crown of the road. No one was trying to right it. Men were on the ground, knocked out by Mills or by the others who had broken up the pack.

"Drive on, Corporal!"

The driver nodded and got into gear, moving the truck a yard forward, the horn sounding a continuous note; the refugees swayed, pressing against the bumper-grille, waving their arms, the men shouting, the women screaming.

"Drive on!"

"I can't, sir! I'll kill 'em!"

The horn went on blaring. The truck juddered to a halt.

The major wrenched at the cab-door and grabbed at the driver's arm. "*Get out of there!*"

The corporal came down in a heap, knocking into a sergeant who had come up from the rear, "What the hell——?" The major was in the cab, banging the gears in:

"Sergeant—tell the convoy to follow—understand?"

"Sir!" The sergeant dodged out of sight, running back along the line of halted vehicles. The major turned his head to the private who was sitting in the cab:

"Get out!" He leaned across and hit the nearside door open. He wasn't going to have anyone sharing this kind of responsibility. "*Get out, man!*"

The private clambered down to the road, fought free of the pack of refugees who tried to bring him to his knees, and ran clear as the truck began moving. The high note of the horn pierced the chorus of voices. The truck moved on, at first crawling in bottom gear, nosing in a slow zig-zag among the pack of men and women, then speeding up as they began lurching clear. A wheel bounced, sliding for a moment; a scream vied with the horn's blare and then was cut off; a man was clawing at the bonnet of the truck, trying to wrench it open; a face rose at the driving-window and the door was dragged open, swinging and knocking the man down; the truck lumbered on, speeding up and then hitting the overturned

barrow at an angle, pushing it along and then bouncing over débris as the barrow broke up and its load was shed, littering the road. A man was running alongside, struggling to reach the driver, but the speed was rising in second gear and he dropped away, his shrill voice fading. From behind there came a burst of fire from the machine-gun as the scout-car, keeping the speed, tucked into the edge of the road with its wheels on the grass and found a clear line of fire above the heads of the refugee column. After three bursts, many of them began running, pulling their children, leaving their barrows and trucks and carts in the roadway as the first truck came on, still accelerating, swerving to avoid a human or an animal or a cart, hitting a barrow and spilling it over, hitting another and slowing under the impact until the light timbers broke up and the truck ran on, free of it.

The major kept one hand on the horn-push, the other on the wheel. His face was bright with sweat; he had stopped shouting, shouting to himself alone in the cab, "They're fifth-column—they're not French—they're fifth-column bastards . . ." He drove on, the radiator cleaving the wave of refugees as they ran scattering to the fields, while the machine-gun kept up a series of bursts, low above their heads.

In twenty minutes the convoy was through the column, driving north at thirty miles an hour, its close rank slowly opening to leave gaps between the vehicles according to procedure. A group of D.R.s were overtaking and riding ahead, two abreast; they had glanced into the cab of the leading truck as they had passed, facing their front again as they had seen the officer there, accelerating and swinging into line.

Before noon, the convoy was moving within twelve miles of the Channel coast, keeping a steady speed.

Trees flanked the road; it tunnelled between their stems. Sunlight, that had broken through the thin waste of cloud an hour ago, was filtering through the leaves. The motor-cycles, meeting with a despatch-rider coming from the north, had slowed and swung about, and were escorting him. His right

hand came up, and the leading truck of the convoy drew into the roadside, halting.

Behind it the gaps closed, then remained fixed as the vehicles pulled up, waiting with engines idling. A scout-car came nosing quickly past the line, making for the head. Sergeant Green, who had passed on the order to follow through the scattering refugees, jumped out of the scout-car and came up to the truck as the D.R. turned about and throttled away northwards.

The major was bunched against the wheel.

"Sarn't Green!"

"Sir?"

"Got orders. We're dumping vehicles and equipment below that hill, and demolishing. Inform drivers. Where's Captain Todd?"

"By the gun, sir."

"Inform him. I'll lead the way. It's a mile."

"Yes, sir. We've picked up two Red Cross wagons, sir. They're at the rear."

"Tell 'em to come past, and make it quick."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant's hand came up in a first-class salute. "That was very good, sir."

Their eyes met for an instant.

"It wasn't. It was bloody awful."

Sergeant Green turned and got into the scout-car. It went forward, swung in the roadway and came back. A long feather of dust drew out from the rear wheels as it went hustling down the line of the convoy.

In the truck behind the major Corporal Binns sat with Mills. Mills was conscious. Apart from the cuts and bruises on his face, there was nothing about him to show he had been the centre of a violent brawl: he sat cheerful enough, dismissing the whole thing. That had been the only good point about the brawl: it had been ugly, humiliating, vulgar and dangerous; but it had vented spleen for Mills, before his vicious disgust of everything French had lodged too deep.

They were all in this truck: Froome, Whiting, Pannet, Smith, Russell. They had talked together, after the convoy had started

its clear run through; and Mills had talked with them; but the other boys in here—about a score of them—still looked at the little runt with the bent face who'd been shot in here unconscious. A tough little sod, cracked in his head, must be.

They sat waiting, Binns's party and twenty others. They heard the motor-cycle and the scout-car. The officer in the cab was shouting to someone. Now there were two Red Cross wagons coming by, their nearside timbers skinning the flanks of the line, their offside wheels cutting a rut along the soft grass verge.

"Whatter we stopped for?" asked Mills.

Every head turned. This kind often broke out again, suddenly. All they needed was a spark. You had to watch them.

"To let the ambulances go by," Binns said.

"They pick up any o' those French, I wonder?" Russell said.

"What French?" It was Smith, looking at Russell.

"Ye'," said Russell. He didn't specially want to remember. He'd as soon forget it. That officer in there was going to put his neck straight into a court-martial, the minute he fetched up anywhere with an H.Q. Unless of course nobody remembered anything.

Binns wondered if the major had any enemies, in this mixed remnant of a unit. He would soon find out.

The truck moved off, taking them unawares, pitching them into one another. Binns's burned shoulder hit something, and he bit off a yelp. Whiting said, "You'll have to put somethin' on that, Corp. Acriflavin, or somethin'."

"Yes. How's your ribs?"

Very rarely for this kid, a smile came. "Ribby," he said.

The truck drove for nearly a mile and then turned down a narrow lane, where leaves brushed its canvas and drew close again behind, so that they seemed to be diving along through light-green water, its surface sky-blue.

"Where the 'ell are we goin' now?" asked a man. No one answered. There were many questions, special war questions that could seldom be answered. They were mild rhetoric, a

comment rather than a question. Where are we? Where are we going? Where's Jerry? What's happening? What are the orders?

The lorry behind them was bumping, less heavily-loaded than this one, its springs flexing over the ruts. The driver stared at these men; they stared at the driver. Then the major's truck turned again, swinging into a place where trees stood sparsely among thin undergrowth, at the foot of a hillock. Birds piped and fled away. The next truck halted, leaving a three-foot gap. The engines of the motor-cycles chugged quietly, idling. The third-in-line pulled up; a sergeant came running into the saplings, turning suddenly and running backwards, waving his arms, guiding the fourth truck to the head, alongside number one. Slowly the sound of engines filled the trees as the convoy came in. A corporal was shouting:

"All out! Come on then—all out!" He was banging the canvas with a stick as he darted among the vehicles. Men began climbing down.

Binns said, "Take it easy, Smithy."

"Ye'. Watch it, cock-o."

They helped him down. He no longer had to hold the pad to his head; the tourniquet had stayed tight, and the flow had clotted long ago. Whiting came down, landing awkwardly; Russell jerked a hand out and righted him. Froome and Pannet joined them, their webbing slung; they had left their rifles in the field, forgetting them when they had run to stop Mills fighting. The bottle of Benedictine was still humped in Froome's ration-bag.

As the men came pouring out of the lorries they were formed up between the trees. For the first time, Binns and his party were able to see the others. Two hundred, maybe more; most of them British, with a few French *poilus* among them; an untidy crowd, some of them with head-bandages, an arm in a sling, a leg bound. Over them all, plain in their quiet faces, was the expression of a retreat, of bitter action. They drew up in ragged ranks, the N.C.O.s pushing them into a kind of order while the M.T. and Workshop crews began on the trucks.

Bonnets were slammed back; a hammer worked, knocking

off a carburettor, smashing a block; a cold-chisel went through a fuel-tank and the fuel poured down; tyres were slashed, the air hissing from the ribboned rubber; glass shattered as the windscreens went; gear-levers were snapped off at the ball; radiators gushed as a sledge-hammer swung. The sound filled the air, the ugly sound of methodical destruction as the men went among the vehicles, working for fifteen minutes, so that after fifteen minutes there was no convoy here, but only a troop of men and a metal-dump.

"Bloody dreadful, isn' it," said Russell. "All good stuff, that. What a bloody waste, isn' it?"

Whiting asked, "How far's the coast now?"

"I dunno."

"Ten mile——"

"And the rest, ol' boy——"

"Christ, it was on'y twenty when we started, an'——"

"Whatever it is, we'll have to slog it."

"Where are we, any'ow?"

Nobody answered. Nobody knew. Nearer the coast; that was all that mattered.

Gunfire was in the ground; they felt it as they talked, under their feet; and it was in the air, a dull, heavy murmur that touched the ears and beat softly inside the head. The air was thick, too, with the drone of planes whose black crosses were out of sight, somewhere beyond these trees. A.A. guns were thumping, and the shells were bursting with the ringing sound of plimsolls in an alley. Sometimes a shudder came, as a stick of bombs fell, or an aircraft hit the ground, blowing up.

Binns was watching the major who had driven their truck, a stocky man with a powerful head and wide shoulders, his body sloped away to the short, energetic legs; he was a cartoon Napoleon, restless in the eyes. Sergeant Green, taller than he, less compact, was reporting.

"Finished, sir. Get the men away an' fire this lot, sir?"

"No, give away our position. But get the men out. See if you can march 'em. What've we got on wheels?"

"Two scout-cars, the big Morris and the P.U., sir."

"Put the wounded in the P.U. Any left over, put 'em in the Morris. Where are those medical chaps?"

"They went off in the Red Cross wagons, sir——"

"Whose orders?"

"I don't know, sir——"

"Blast their eyes. Where's Lieutenant Briggs?"

"Here, sir." Briggs was behind him.

"Good. Get on, then, Green."

"Yes, sir."

"Briggy, what's your shape?"

"All right. We can go."

Briggs stood erect, a six-footer, looking down on little Mowbray, the major. Mowbray said:

"Did we leave a lot of mess behind?"

"Mess?"

"You know."

"Oh. Not much. Don't worry."

So many years ago, back in the old times, they had stood together like this, under different trees, the gnarled boughs of an orchard, the orchard behind the school. Moonlight; their ears still singing; their breath panting from the run. It had been a home-made bomb, put together in the chemmy-lab in secret; it had seemed a long time to wait, for what they had called 'testing-night'. It had been a good bomb, God only knew. They'd got away with their eyebrows and not much else. Mowbray had been scared. Briggs had been scared too, but nothing could ever shake him badly. Mowbray had asked, facing him in the moonlight, "Did we do much damage, Briggy?" Briggs had grinned feebly. "Not much. Don't worry."

A long time ago. Some other world, buried in a diary, almost forgotten.

"I'm not worrying."

"Good. I'd have done the same thing, if I'd had the guts."

Mowbray was looking at the ground, tilting on his heels. He said brusquely, "I wouldn't have minded so much, but there were the women."

"I don't think they got hurt. Not the women."

Mowbray looked up.

"All right, we'll push on. It's twelve miles. We'll be running into muck, by the sound of it. Keep the men together, single line each side of the road, and if it gets too bad, tell 'em to find their way on their own. They know what to look for—the sea."

"Yes, sir."

As Briggs turned away, Mowbray called, "We'll try to keep in some sort of touch."

A quick grin. "You bet."

Briggs walked on, then stopped sharply in his stride as the first three Dorniers came over the tree-tops in a swift dark rush, plummeting out of sight; then there were three more, and three more, and three more, winging down from a good height on their run-in. They were all out of sight beyond the trees before the ack-ack began, firing high at first, well off the beam, bursting above the hill.

N.C.O.s were shouting for the men to get down; they fell in a ragged brown wave. Lieutenant Briggs was running towards them, calling to the N.C.O.s, "Get them clear of the transport!"

Many of them were already crouching in a run through the thin stems of the saplings, mindful of the petrol and fuel-oil that had been spilled from the tanks. Sergeant Green was mustering a group into the narrow lane. Corporal Binns was helping Smith along, climbing with the others through the trees as the first bombs fell, not much short of a mile away to the north. The ground danced. Splinters were falling from the A.A. shells, pattering among the leaves, pinging on a tin-hat, rattling among the pack of trucks. The rest of the bombs came down in a rhythmic series, and the thin trees shivered on the dancing ground.

"All right, keep low now!"

"Get your tin-hat on, that man!"

"Sarn't Green! Drive those cars clear of the dump!"

Fragments fell, bouncing on metal, striking sparks. The Dorniers were turning, going up into the sun, climbing through a flock of puff-balls and then banking, lost in the blinding

glare. Then they were forgotten, as a chip of shell-case struck a spark among the lorries, firing the fumes. The rush of flame swept across the ground so swiftly that the ignition seemed spontaneous; suddenly the entire area was a nest of flames and the trucks were hidden until the first fury died and the vehicles themselves began burning from tyres upwards.

Through the sound of the flames there now came the hellish tumult of the diving squadron as it toppled out of the sun and straddled the earth with explosive a mile away. The ground was alive again, quivering.

Next to Corporal Binns and Froome sat Pannet, crouched tightly with his whole body trying to squeeze under his tin-hat.

"My God . . ." he said.

"What's up?" Froome asked, turning his head.

Pannet looked at him, and then at the waste of flames, his ears pummelled by the bombs and the thump of the ack-ack guns. He looked back at Froome. "Nothing," he said with a quick grin. "Nothing at all."

In these few minutes, a man could distinguish sight from sound: could know that the flames had nothing to do with the hammering of the bombs and guns; he could realise, even, that there was not much danger here: no one was near the flames; the guns were firing at the aircraft; the aircraft were bombing a target a mile distant. But, on the other side these practical considerations, a man could be in this place and think: this is Hell, the capital H Hell, the place we've been warned about, where Satan's the C.O. and there's no leave, ever. Because, in this place, the heat of the fire was in your face and you could smell it. You were at the brink of the Inferno. And the sound was as huge, and as hellish: it shook the earth until you knew that chasms would open, under you, in the next second, and that all you would see, as you plunged out of this world, was that inferno over there. Your funeral pyre. So that sweat ran down your face as you sat here watching the blaze, sweat drawn out by its heat and by the struggle inside you to keep your head and convince yourself that this was only war, not the Reckoning.

In peace, your nerves had been rattled by the telephone sometimes, or by someone's voice, a monotonous motor-horn,

a squealing brake; but now you had to sit here, in this place, and your nerves had to sit here with you, and keep quiet. There would never be more than this to contend with. If you could watch this, and listen to this, and keep your head, you'd be all right.

Then the bomber came down. Flak had caught it on the last run-in, and it had pulled out, the pilot hoping he might bring it down somewhere with a live crew. Then the tanks had caught, and the explosion blew a wing off, so that the rest of the machine was spinning in a mad fly's throes, spiralling down in death. It was coming down here, bursting across the trees and clearing the holocaust that had been a convoy and hitting the earth a hundred yards from the men. But it was not, really, a bomber that came down. A bomber is made of cold metal, and has two wings, and men inside. This thing that hit the earth was a shapeless brand of flame with a tail of whorled smoke above it, and there was nothing inside that would be recognised as a crew of men. This was just a bit of the war breaking off.

It came down flat with a sickening sound as soft as a million beetles under a boot, and the blaze burst, throwing out streamers, orange and yellow, arching into the air and falling among the flames of the transport-dump and mingling there, brilliant and beautiful.

The men watched, two hundred of them, huddled among the saplings. One of them began running towards the wreck, and a corporal tripped him.

"Don't be a bloody fool."

"But we could——"

"Stuff it. Get back."

The man wanted to say, 'But, listen . . .' Because there were voices, somewhere in those flames, voices of animals that one could almost imagine as human.

The men watched. If you could get there in time, you could not force a way through the heat; and you would only find freaks there, that would spend the rest of their lives in darkened rooms, fed with tubes, sent to sleep with drugs, condemned to a double sentence of alternate wakefulness and dreams. And even if you could do anything, why should you? You were

taught to bring them down, trap them in there, set them roasting alive; blow them up; shoot them down; get that blood out of their bodies in what way you could—drain it, boil it, spill it somehow, before they spilled yours. Something to do with an empire and an ideology, a balance of international economy, the breakdown of a conference, a treaty torn up.

What is a treaty, Smith minor? What is an ultimatum, Smith major? What is an Enfield, Cadet Smith? What are your orders, Captain Smith? Then carry on.

That was a treaty. This. Drawn up with a million men and signed with their blood. Because there was an empire, and an ideology; overcrowding and *lebensraum*; a budget, a bankrupt, a balance. So there was nothing to do about it but this. Men had lived too long out of their element; culture and grace and nobility had proved a strain on the gross animal element at the core; and now they were back in the muck.

The men watched, huddled among the trees. Only one of them had begun running towards the dying enemy, and he had been tripped. In any given number of men there's always a bloody fool.

The flames leapt, scorching the eyeballs even at this distance. Men were moving away, without orders, their mud-brown figures filtering through the smoke and the stems of the young trees.

"Captain Todd!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Start marching!"

"Sarn't Green!"

"Sir?"

"Get those crocks away in the cars!"

Men moved towards the lane where the convoy had come in. An order was voiced. An engine started up. Somebody fired a rifle, tripping among the undergrowth, a man with a bad memory, a rifle with the catch left off, a bullet with no purpose.

"Smithy."

"Yes?"

Binns held his arm. "They're putting casualties into the cars. You'll have to hurry."

"I'm all right——"

"Don't be stupid, it's a free ride——"

"I'm not a bloody casualty——"

"That's a head wound, and you can't——"

"There are plenty worse off than me."

Binns gave it up. He said, "Mills!"

"I'm on Shanks's, Corp. Come on, fer Chri' sake, or we'll be late an' Mum'll be worried."

Russell said to Froome, "You still got your lemonade, cock-o?"

"What? Oh, streuth——" Froome felt behind him. The hump was still there in his ration-bag. "Yes. Shut up, will you? My nerves won't stand it."

Pannet grinned, remembering, 'When this cork comes out, I'll be in England, my brothers.'

Binns glanced at them. "Are you still sticking with us?"

Froome said, "It's not much of a party, but we've nowhere else to go."

They reached the lane, falling in behind the two lines. When they came to the main road, the lines opened and the men filed steadily through the dust at the edge of the grass on each side. Smoke was clouding across from the burning dump and the Dornier, but they could see a few miles ahead, where the road ran straight. On both sides of it there was equipment burning; lorries and carriers were tipped nose-first into the fields, many of them on fire. A French horse-drawn unit was dragging along a minor road that met this one, half a mile ahead. The barrage in the north was still hammering; aircraft were up there, weaving singly, in groups, in patterns of avoiding-action, and there was a flight of fifty or sixty day-bombers moving high. The concentration was on the north; the north was the focus of movement along this and other roads, along railways, along the airy streets of the sky.

The armies and air forces of two nations were focused on this northern point, the smallest, most crowded cockpit in military experience.

The men marched, at first interested in the planes, the French horse-drawn unit, the avenue of fires, then settling down to the dull, dogged business of pushing their boots on through the dust.

Near the point where the minor road met this one, there was a signboard, battered and leaning over but still legible. It said: *Dunkerque.*

NINE

THEY thought, as they marched. Binns was wishing they'd stayed on their own. They would have stood a better chance. If they had any M.E.s over this road, with machine-guns, half this lot would be ripped up and left dead. Machine-guns were worse than bombs, on a road like this. He thought about Dave Bellman, and Harper, both dead. How far were he and Mike going to get—how much farther than Dave? It was going to be worse from now on. Until now, it had been a picnic. His shoulder burned. The blood had caked his cheek, drying. When did he cut his face, then? His trouser-leg was flapping, half of the cloth torn away for Smith's bandage. How was Smith? How was Mills? Whiting—the kid had caught a hoof in the ribs. How was Mike?

"Mike." He spoke over his shoulder.

"Ye'?"

"You all right?"

"Who, me?"

Russell loped steadily behind the bundling Binns. This was a turn-up, this was. They were marching as fast as they could towards the north, and look at the bloody north. It was on fire. The whole place was on fire, everywhere. You couldn't see a patch of green without smoke, or a patch of blue without planes. What were they walking into, for God's sake? His arm was stiff. It didn't feel infected, but a chip of glass moved now and then, deep in the flesh, if he brought up his arm too high, or tried to hitch up a shoulder-strap. His feet were swollen, his feet and his eyes. How far were they going, this lot? How far was the coast?

"Tubby."

"Yes?"

"How far's the coast?"

"Twelve miles. Less."

"How d'you know?"

"I heard one of the D.R.s say so."

"Is that all? Twelve miles?"

"Yes."

"Nearly over, then, eh, cock-o?"

"What is?"

"I dunno." The march, the retreat, the war.

They passed two battle-stragglers at the side of the road. One was sitting down, trying to tug his boots off. The other was standing over him.

"Come on, Len, for Chri' sake!"

"In a minute. Me feet're killin' me."

"So're mine, but we got to get on. Come on, fer——"

"Turn it up, can't you? Bloody well get on, if you're s' bloody keen——"

"Listen, we can't stop 'ere till the bleedin' crows come 'ome, we got to——"

"For cryin' out, you're worse than the wife, you are——"

"Aow come on, Len, we've stopped 'alf a dozen times for your perishin' feet——"

"Aow, shuddup."

Their voices faded behind, drowned by the crackle of timber as they passed a three-tonner, ablaze from rad to tailboard. The left-hand file had to shift over to avoid the heat and the smoke. A man dropped down; two others stopped for him. A third tripped on him, found his feet again and kept on, closing the gap. This had happen'd many times in the last two miles. Some of the stragglers who had picked up the main convoy had been going down with dysentery, getting up again and marching a spell, going down again. A few of them had been put into the cars, and were ahead somewhere, resting in fever; but only a few.

Smith lurched in his stride, catching the heel of the man in front, Pannet.

"Sorry."

"Okay. Feel bad?"

"No. Tired."

Pannet thought with a grin: That's a nice word. Tired.

A sergeant was coming down the line. It was Green. He stood in the middle of the road, watching them as they went by.

"Keep it up, lads. Not far now. Keep it up. That man—get your tin-hat on! All right, step it out now. Keep it up."

They thought: Sod off. Whadyer think we're doin' now? Trust ole Greeny, can't never shut 'is gob.

Their step steadied. Sod 'im. Thank the Lord it isn't far now. Can't shut 'is gob. Might get to the coast by dark, this rate, and have a kip. Not so bad. Could be worse.

Their step quickened. Bloody sergeants, never no peace.

"Keep it up now!"

Fading behind.

At the rear of the column men were picking up those who had dropped, or who couldn't keep up. They were helping them, one lurching along between two of his mates; another hobbling, keeping the weight off a blistered foot; another half-conscious, head down, his limbs jerking as his friends took him with them, dragging him, worrying him, but taking him with them, sweating at it, cursing him, stumbling and going on, giving him hell but taking him with them, because they wanted him.

"Keep it up!"

Green marched back to the head of the column and reached there soaked in his sweat.

"How are they going, Sarn't?"

"Can't grumble, sir. They'll make it."

He stood still, letting the first score go by him. No one looked at him. They looked at the heels of the man in front, keeping in step. Heels once black, once polished, black glass, see your face in them. Chatham, Salisbury, Aldershot heels, pride of the parade. Now they were something off a muck-heap; but they marched.

"Keep it up! Come on, now, keep in step!"

The files passed. A man dropped, got to his feet, went on. A man was singing; that was what you would call it, if you were kind. A man turned his head; Taffy was all right, still there; he faced his front, and watched the Salisbury boots and the dust powdering up, getting into the boots, setting their feet on fire, swelling them, burning them to blisters.

"Come on—keep it up!"

Sod 'im.

Their step steadied.

At the rear, there was Green again. Marching twice as far as they were, always standing still. His face was bright wet.

"Come on, now! I'm takin' you lot with me if I 'ave to carry you!"

"Go on, then, Sarge, carry me."

"You'd wish I 'adn't, my son! Come on, pick it up!"

There was a kid slung between two of his mates.

"What's the matter with him?"

"Passed out, Sarge."

"You two lofties, take this man!"

"We're okay, Sarge—we c'n manage 'im——"

"Shuddup, Shortarse. Now then—don't wake 'im up, 'e'll want 'is bottle. All right, pick up the step there! Not far now!"

He marched back, passing the two files, a hundred men to each file, and reached the front.

"Any dropping out, Sarn't Green?"

"No, sir."

He turned and stood in the middle of the road. They went past in step. The dust had gone; they walked through ashes now, through fire; their feet had burst out of their boots; they couldn't feel their feet, only the ashes, red-hot ashes. They wanted to sleep; they wanted a dri. .; they wanted to drop.

"Keep it up!"

Their step steadied.

A staff-car came through from the south, driving on the crown of the road, red-tabs aboard. It raised dust, and left it in their faces. Another came, its horn pip-pipping, going by fast, pennant fluttering, the dust going up in a long feathering gust and then falling, settling over the boots. Later, an ambulance drove through, with two orderlies hanging on to the step at the back.

The column crossed a canal, breaking step over the bridge, their boots clanging on metal. In the water a drowned horse floated, belly swollen and legs stiff. The top of a wagon made a

square island in the surface; a scum of straw floated towards the bridge, its carpet broken by flotsam: a petrol-drum, an ammo-box, a haversack, the wheel of a cart, a man's cap.

A mile past the canal was a village. It was still on fire. To the west of it refugees were crowded on the road, not moving, their faces turning to look at the village, the sky, the column of men marching north. They did not know where to go. There seemed to be nowhere, now. Some of them had come in from the south, and had joined those from the burning village. They could not go on, from here, to the north; the north was ablaze, half-hidden by smoke that had been pouring from a group of storage-tanks for twelve hours now. Bombers were crossing from east and west, going in among the flak and dropping their loads, most of them coming back, rising above the shells and re-forming; at different levels others crossed their path, flying north.

Heavy artillery was dug in between a fold of land to the south-west and a wood that ran north-south. The shells were going over very high, to burst among the smoke. Somewhere in the smoke were the docks of Dunkerque. Explosive was being dropped there from the guns and from the planes; it was a dumping-ground for live T.N.T.

The marching column neared the village, coming upon a block built of trucks drawn broadside-on to the road. French civilians stood in clusters, their property piled on carts and barrows, their faces turned to look at the north. Behind the road-block the street into the village was jammed with Army vehicles, abandoned among the burning houses.

"Hult!"

The column stopped. Men dropped where they stood, lying flat, their arms out and heads pillowed on their tin-hats.

For the record, Sergeant Green called, "Rest easy!"

Corporal Binns sat down, wiping his face. Russell lay full-length on his back beside him. Mills was pulling his boots off. Froome slid his ration-bag round to protect the Benedictine, and looked at Pannet. Pannet grinned.

"What a shame. I was enjoying that."

Froome said, "Listen: are we going to Dunkerque?"

"Where's that?"

"Saw it on a signboard."

"I dunno where we're going. I'm just glad we've stopped."

"Listen; if we're going to Dunkerque, that'll be it, over there."

Pannet gazed at the smoke-clouds.

"You mean over there?"

"Yep."

"Include me out, mate. This is as far as I come."

Smith said, "What's the drill, Corp?"

"I don't know."

"I thought we were going to re-muster, when we got this far," said Pannet.

Russell said, "Christ, re-muster what, cock-o?"

Froome felt for a cigarette. "It's an evacuation, I'd say." There was no cigarette.

"What, back 'ome?" Mills piped up.

"I suppose so. There's nowhere else. Holland's out, Belgium's out, France is on its benders. There's only England."

Whiting said, "That's all I want."

Russell sat up. "You mean they'll take us back in ships?"

"Those that can't swim."

"They'll need some bloody ships, then."

There were some men moving slowly down the column: two officers, a sergeant and a corporal. When the corporal reached the rearguard he called out:

"All right, get this. We're five miles from the coast, south-east of Dunkerque. Orders are: find your way there quick as you can, an' report to the Navy. That clear now? Break up, make your way there, an' report to the Navy."

He went back amid a hail of questions. He answered none. There were no answers.

Binns heard the tail-end of the corporal's orders. Report to the Navy. It was an odd word. They had forgotten there was a Navy. They had forgotten there was an Air Force, other than Hitler's. They had known nothing except that the Army was cracking, fighting a rearguard across France, fighting more desperately than in an offensive, not so much cracking as being

cracked, where it was hardest, where it fought a hundred last stands to give the others time. Now there was this strange word, flung at them as they sat in the dust, nursing their sores.

"The Navy?" said Mills.

Russell nodded. "Jus' what I was tellin' you. We're gettin' out."

Binns said nothing. This was it, then. It was no good hoping any more, pretending there was a future over here. They were running for home, the lot of them, the whole of the B.E.F. There hadn't been an R.A.F. plane in the sky for a week now. The only British guns they had seen were bombed into silence. Now there was only the Navy. Report to the Navy. He should have cheered—there was a Navy, there was something to report to, a homeland to go to. This wasn't the end.

He looked at the men. Some of them were getting up, going off in pairs, in groups. Most of them still sat or lay on the grass verge, resting. He saw the smoke drifting away from the burned-out village, where the street was jammed with abandoned vehicles; and the crowd of refugees, still motionless, bewildered, without refuge; and beyond the blackened skeletons of roofs, the vast cloud of smoke rolling westwards in the slow wind, shot with flame at its base. With every second, as he watched, another group of shells went in from the batteries in the west; with every minute, another load of bombs. If this wasn't the end, then, in God's name, what was it?

"Tubby."

"Yes?"

"We goin', cock-o?"

He looked at Russell. So often he had turned his head, and seen this face, heard this voice say 'cock-o', felt the presence of this Celtic gangling man. In the training days, when one was worried about home, the wife, the family, the job, the future, Mike had been there as a rooky, one of the awkward-squad; then he had been a swaddy, working well enough with his unit; then, after the 10th, he had been something else: a kind of constant factor in a gabble of algebraic gibberish, a known

symbol: a number you could always turn up, and it would never let you down. So, after all, this wasn't the end; it wouldn't be the end until Binns turned his head and couldn't see Mike.

"Well, are we, cock-o?"

"Wha'?"

"I said are we goin'?"

"Yes."

Binns got up. The pain poured down his shoulder into his stomach. The sky flickered, then steadied. Russell stood up and looked at the others.

"All right, my little puck-os, rise an' shine!"

Whiting opened his eyes. The corporal and his mate looked very tall, standing above him. They looked strong and confident. Were they as strong as that? He had to have someone.

"Come on, Whiting."

He got to his feet. The movement knocked his breath out as a streak of pain cut across his chest; he bent over for a few moments.

"What's up, kid?"

"Wind."

Pannet was sitting watching the road they had come along. A few vehicles were grinding up from the south, the battered remains of a transport column. Going the other way was a man, walking.

Froome said, "Let's go, Bob."

"Where?" Pannet did not turn his head.

"Home."

"England?"

"Yes. Home and beauty."

Pannet turned his head now, glanced up at Corporal Binns and then down at Froome. "I'm not all that keen."

Froome said, "You can get things worked out, once you're there. Better than letting it just go on."

"I want it to go on——"

"I don't suppose you mean that——"

"Of course I mean it. It's gone too far, for one thing, to stop. And if she can do that while I'm over here, I don't want

her. She's not good enough. I want someone much better, a woman less of a whore——"

"They're all whores, when it comes to——"

"I know. I said less of a whore. Better than this one——"

"But you're in love with——"

"Am I?" Pannet stood up, grinning. "I suppose you want to get back to Mum."

Froome said, "Well, the old thing'll want to know why the war's gone wrong, and since she imagines I'm running it, I'll have to report to her and give some excuse. And besides, there are——" he broke off, standing up, picking dried mud from his best blue.

"There are the girls," nodded Pannet.

Froome said, "Yep. I'll have to pick up the traces."

"Pick up, or kick over?"

"Listen, Bob, why not keep on with us? I'm going to have a crack at getting home. With a bit of luck, we——"

"Yes, I'll come. I was just trying to make up my mind."

Russell's voice came again. "You comin', Milly, my little puck-o?"

"Yerce, as soon as I c'n get these bleeders on." Mills was struggling with his boots. The soles of his socks had worn through long ago, and his feet were bleeding, the ankle still swollen. Binns said:

"Well, we can't go more than five miles, whatever happens."

"Tha's lovely, Corp. On'y five more miles? Tha's wunnerful. Just' what I been 'opin' for. I was jus' thinkin', now if on'y we c'd go off on a nice five-mile walk, in the nice fresh air——"

"Come on, Milly, it's the last stretch." Whiting picked up his webbing for him. Binns said:

"Where's Smith?"

Pannet looked at the corporal. Mills tied the laces and said, "'Avin' a crap, I 'spect." He always judged this to be a man's only conceivable reason for sudden absence.

Russell looked along the roadside. Half the two hundred men had gone; they were straggling across the farmyard at the edge of the cottages, spreading out into the fields. The others

were getting ready, standing and waiting for their mates to get their boots on, find their few belongings.

"Smithy!" Russell shouted.

A dark, tattered man called, "'Allo!" He was the wrong Smithy.

"Not you, cock-o."

Binns said, "Can anyone see him?"

Pannet settled his webbing. "He's gone," he said.

Binns looked at him. "Gone?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask him."

"When did he go?"

"Oh, some time back."

"Which way?"

They were all watching Pannet. He said:

"The way we came."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Yes. He said 'Tell them not to waste any time looking for me.' Then he went off."

Russell's face was wrinkled with surprise. "Why, cock-o?"

"I didn't ask him anything."

Whiting was silent, watching the road. The battered P.U.s and thirty-hundredweights were halting, seeing the road-block and the village. The only thing Whiting knew about Smith was that he could speak French like a native. That might be something to do with it.

"He might have told me he was going," said Binns. He was the N.C.O. in charge of this party, and he didn't like men just sloping off on the quiet.

Mills said, "It's 'is 'ead. 'E's gone barmy. It's 'cos of what 'appened to 'is 'ead."

Pannet said, "No, he's all right." He had always wondered how long Smith would be with them. This did not surprise him.

Binns shrugged. "All right, we'll get on." He had no heart in it. The Army was running home. Smith had gone sloping off. There was so-much muck ahead of them that it didn't seem

worth while trying to get there. "You can keep together or break up and find your own way, just as you like."

Russell fell into step with him as Binns began walking along the last fifty yards or so of the road that led to the block of trucks and the jammed village. This road had come to a dead-end. So had a lot of things.

"Cheer up, my cock-o."

"Yes."

"We're still alive-o."

"Yes. How's your arm, Mike?"

"What arm?"

Russell kept in step with him, shortening his stride.

"What happened to Smith, then, Tubby?"

"I don't know. He was an odd bloke."

"Ye'. Quiet type."

"I suppose he thought that if we were reporting to the Navy, we'd had our lot."

"It might've been that, ye'."

"But I don't think it was."

"Eh?"

"Are the others coming, Mike?"

Russell looked round. "Ye'. They're all comin'."

They left the road, passing the block and skirting the farmyard. A clutter of hens were scratching about over a heap of spilled corn. A woman stood on a doorstep, holding the hand of a stunted wide-eyed boy who was asking her questions, tugging at her hand, pointing to the soldiers. She watched them go past, and said nothing to the boy.

They came to a narrow street at the edge of the village, and walked over cobbles. Men were coming down this way from the road; men from their own files and from the transport that was still coming up from the south, halting at the road-block and being left there. The tramp of boots loudened in the little street, and soon Binns and Russell were moving shoulder to shoulder with other men. Along one side of the street there had been tiny gardens, each with a path and a patch of lawn, a flower-bed, a shrub. These were gone now, for men had marched this way filling the street, pressing over and at last

going across the line of gardens, trampling down the flowers and turning the lawns to mud. Even now, an old cramped man or a housewife was standing on a doorstep here and there, watching the men go by; and children sat on window-sills, calling to their elders, staring into the faces of the men as they passed, touching the rough khaki shoulders with a grimy hand, "*Chocolat! Chocolat!*"

Binns thought of his children, thought of an army of men trudging through his own small garden. It was not possible. It was like trying to see a flat picture in three dimensions: one's eye could not get round. This could be my garden; that little girl could be Jill. But it was not possible. These were other people; they could never be me.

"Poor little bastards," Russell said.

"Yes."

"What're they waitin' here for?"

"Where else can they go?"

"Ye'. Ye'."

The street was loud with boots, with voices, with the echoing shudder of the guns north of here. The street had a roof of sound as aircraft went across. Then there was a gradual jamming of shoulders as the men had to slow, pressing sideways, struggling to clear a bottleneck. Binns asked Russell what was happening. Russell was taller.

"Someone's on the ground, I think. They're tryin' to get 'im out of the way."

A group of men were bent over someone. A sergeant was shouting his way through the pack.

"All right, get 'im up, quick."

The main throng pressed sideways, squeezing through the bottleneck. The sergeant was standing with his shoulders against the khaki tide, his feet dug in, pressing the men away, making room while the Frenchman was lifted and hustled into a doorway: a very old man with a pocked face, one arm dangling in a thin black sleeve, thin and black as a broken twig, his old head lolling, pale and fragile as a shell, the eyes still open, the last sight gone from them: the sight of foreign soldiers trampling his flowers down, of his grandchild perched

on the window-sill, making for his old ears the last sound before they were deafened by death, "*Chocolat! Chocolat!*" He was dumped into the doorway and left. A woman was lamenting in the shadows, her voice fading as the men moved on, the bottleneck opening, the street filling again, the moment over, another of the million moments, over now.

The houses shivered as a load of bombs went down not far beyond them. The guns in the south-west had never stopped; their sound was a background.

As the men reached the end of the village, their eyes sore from the smoke that had eddied down from the smouldering timber, they could see only other fires, and other men. Men were coming north across a network of roads, converging on three bridges that spanned a canal. Equipment, stores and vehicles were burning, heaped or scattered along the road-sides and the canal-banks, the smoke gathering and merging and becoming a thin grey flood creeping across the flat country, hiding half the horizon. Men reached it, and walked into it, and were lost in it, reappearing as the wind shifted, or as they turned east along the far side of the canal.

Overhead, bombers were weaving down through a light scatter of flak, dropping their loads at the edge of the sea, climbing and coming back. There was a casualness about their raiding, the monotony of routine as they came over, ran-in and turned, cruising back to the east, vanishing into the thin cloud that was drawing over the sky, slow and pink-tinged in the late afternoon sunshine.

Binns had not talked since they had seen the old man dumped into the doorway. They trudged now across a field of vegetables, whose earth and plants had been trodden to green-brown muck. Russell said:

"D'you think they know what they're doin', Tubby?"

"Who?"

"The generals, an' that lot."

"I expect so."

"Well, what's goin' to happen when we get to the sea? You needn't tell me the Navy's goin' to get this lot away, inside of a month."

"I'm not telling you anything. I don't know anything. We're reporting to the Navy, and that's all I know."

They were slowed by men standing about. The nearest bridge over the canal was not far from them, but it was jamming up as a French group tried to drive horse-drawn equipment across. A knot of British officers were waving them back, jumping to the heads of the horses and turning them, while the Frenchmen shouted abuse, turning them back, spurring them at the bridge. The horses reared, their hoofs ringing down on the iron ramp.

Corporal Binns said, "Those are the Allies."

"Eh?"

"Nothing."

A wagon tipped over, tilting drunkenly down the canal-bank backwards; the horse struggled to pull it clear; the driver stopped shouting at the R.T.O.s and heaved at the horse while the horse pulled at the wagon; but the wagon sank deeper and stores floated away, bobbing under the bridge. Then one of the officers unhitched the shafts, and slapped the horse on the flank. It ran free, knocking down the man; then the man got up and began yelling at the officer. The officer shouted:

"Orders are to leave equipment outside the perimeter!"

The man went on yelling until the officer turned his back on him and rejoined the others at the bridge. One of them laughed, his arm braced against a stanchion, letting a double file of infantry go through. The rest of the horse-drawn equipment was drawn up near the canal bank; the Frenchmen went on shouting, sometimes to the officers, sometimes to one another.

"Come on, Mike."

"Ye'. Before the bloody bridge goes down."

Whiting said, "Come on, Mills."

Mills was watching the horses. He said, "If them Froggies do anythin' to them 'orses, I'll pull their guts out an' stuff 'em back dahn their throats."

Pannet grinned. "Come on, Sunshine." They grabbed Mills and frog-marched him to the end of the bridge, pressing their way over with the pack, spreading out on the far side of the

canal, finding a roadway; but the roadway was choked already with refugees moving south across the canals: people, this time, with no property, no barrows, no animals.

"Where the hell's this lot comin' from, Corp?"

"Dunkerque."

"Where's 'at?"

"See that smoke?"

"Jesus!"

In many places, along the narrow road, it was impossible to get through without forcing the refugees into the flooded ground on each side of it; but they did not scream at the soldiers; their faces were blank; they dragged themselves out of the mire and hobbled on, their heads turning constantly as they tried to see where they must go; but there was nowhere, except away from home. Home was under that smoke.

Along every road that led to the coast there were men in khaki, pressing north, and refugees struggling against them, south. Many of them dropped in their stride as three M.E.s came over, strafing, climbing, turning, diving again and again strafing, their bullets riddling the packed roads, the bridges, and the waters of the canal. Men floated in the canal.

"'Ere, look out."

"What's up, Milly?"

"That lot."

They looked at the sky. The sky had darkened in the south-west, and the air was trembling.

"Christ Almighty . . ."

The bombers were coming over at five levels, and they were impossible to count. There were not fewer than two hundred of them; there might have been three. They were banked, from two thousand feet to five or six thousand. They were ignoring a peppering of ack-ack fire that was going up at their east flank; they kept on their course, towards Dunkerque. A minute passed, two minutes, then the explosive went down. Flames bloomed suddenly, shooting up from the smoke-cloud and tinting the smoke with orange and yellow stains; and now the ground shook under the feet of the men massed at the canals, and most of them stopped moving, to watch, to listen.

Mills shouted above the thunder, "Where's the bloody R.A.F., fer Chri' sake? Ain't we got no bloody Air Force?"

"Ye'—where's the fighters, the bloody Spitfires?"

Mills looked up at Froome, "Where's yer mates? In bloody bed or somewhere, eh?"

Binns said, "Shuddup, Mills. Get on."

"I thought we 'ad some——"

"Get on, will you?"

They moved again, their boots alive on the jumping ground as the bombers made a second run-in over the target, two or three miles north-west. It was not easy, to accept the massacre. Fighting would have been easier, fighting to the death, with something in your hand, with a few of your own planes overhead. It was not easy to take this, and not give anything back. This was worse than the Frenchwoman's laugh; it had the same quality, itching in your spleen. To go through this, you had to have faith in a future, had to believe there was going to be a chance to right this hideous wrong, to rub the German face in the mud until it was blind and stifled. But for these men, at this time, a faith in any future was hard to come by. Faith in God wasn't enough; it had to be faith in men, in their own selves. They needed rage, to get them through this; and most of them were too weary for rage, too discouraged by their experience of the past three weeks to believe they could ever stop running, and make a stand, as some units had done. They must plod on, thrusting their way through a rabble of foreigners, with no equipment, no relief, no orders other than to report to a senior service who would try to deliver them from utter defeat.

These men, here in their tens of thousands, were strong enough, ready enough to do what they were in this uniform to do; and it was denied them; and they moved with bitterness across the flat French land, sick of the French, sick of themselves, of their leaders, the Whitehall warriors who had put out the flags and struck up the band, full of the joy of war. If they wanted a war, why didn't they rake round and find a few guns and throw a few planes in the air?

So evening came down and found them like this, packed

along the narrow roads, queueing at the bridges over the network of canals, hampered by the refugees and by their own blistered feet and their hunger and thirst and loss of sleep, harried by dive-bombers and a mortar-battalion set up in the east, sickened by the pounding of the guns and the canopy of aircraft that passed above their heads towards the docks, unmolested, unchallenged, taking their time until the light faded and night came: a night that was hardly more dark than day, a rufous night, ruddled with flames, lit with the glare of shell and bomb and flare as the attack went on, driving the men to the sea.

Toward midnight it was quieter. At a little after eleven o'clock a bomber-formation had come over, a single squadron, almost an afterthought, dropping its load and leaving. Those men who were still awake—and most, here, were awake—looked up at the planes, whose wings were smudged with dull orange light from the fires below. They were not flying very high. With an A.A. battery in this small area, half of the squadron could have been blown out of the darkness. But there was no battery. The planes flew steadily, until the orange faded from their wings and the drone of engines and propellers died; then they were gone. No more had come, and now it was midnight.

Shells were still coming over from the south-west, and those men who were themselves a little distance south-west of the dock area could hear the shells passing above them, rushing in the air that was already thick with the stench of sulphur and the smoke of the crumbling town. The barrage was less heavy, but still strong, and there were no intervals longer than a minute or two.

From where Corporal Binns and his party were huddled it was not possible to hear the shells coming over; there was just the hammer of the guns, a pause, and then the hollow crump as the explosive was detonated, somewhere in the fire that was called Dunkerque. In the intervals, the sound of the fire remained: a soft crackling of timber, punctuated by a sudden rush of masonry as it collapsed. Flames would then leap,

thrusting upwards from the glow, licking the belly of the smoke-cloud that sprawled across half the sky; and sparks would rise, rocketing in bright red flocks, falling away.

Corporal Binns sat with his back to a low wall. He and the others had come to a stop, a few hours ago, and were now resting in a place not far across the Dunkerque-Furnes canal, beyond Basse Plaine. Between here and the sea lay the village of Bray and the dunes. From here they could not see the Channel, but only the jut of small buildings and the dark humps of the dunes curving east-west on the horizon; and they could see Dunkerque, the big fire. On this night the terrain appeared strange, with the blaze of the town and the soft curves of the dunes making the world half-desert and half-volcano country, overshadowed by the smoke-mountains in the west. A man could dream, here, that there really was a purgatory between life and hell, where he must rest, suspended, until the time came to go on.

Binns had smoked a cigarette that someone had given him. He sat hunched, thinking about the war, his wife, Dave Bellman, B.S.M. Leech, Smith, the war, his mind circling round the pain of his burned shoulder. He did not think of the future. The only thing it was possible to know about the future was that it would be worse than this; so he did not think of it.

A man was moaning, not far away. Along this wall there were a hundred men. A hundred more were lying on the short scrubby grass, and along the bank of the big canal. One of them was moaning, in pain. Binns had listened to him for an hour, since the last bombers had come and gone. He was not moved by the sound. Three weeks ago it would have worried him, but not now. The senses and the emotions were all in purgatory, too: worry, fear, hope, frustration, even pity were suspended. One was anaesthetised by experience. If one worried, sitting here in the glare of the volcano, one would go mad.

"Tubby."

"Yes?"

"What's the time?"

"Don't know."

"About midnight, eh?"

"About that."

Russell stretched out at full-length, his head cradled in his upturned tin-hat. "It was bloody funny, wasn't it, about Smith."

"Yes."

"What he go off for, like that?"

"I don't know." He didn't want to talk about Smith.

"Think he got scared, cock-o?"

"I don't think so. Not Smith."

Mills, curled up near Russell, said, "'E 'ad a girl. French girl."

"Eh?"

"When we was up near the frontier, waitin' for the war to start. She was smashin', I can tell you. I see 'er, once. Me an' Fred an'—an' Ron 'Arper was out rabbitin', see, one day, an' we see 'er, this tart, with Smithy. Chri', she was all right. Brown 'air, lovely chestnut-colour 'air, an' long legs, you know, long thighs, she got, an'——"

"She soun's more like a bloody horse, cock-o, the way you say it."

Pannet laughed. "How many hands?"

"'Ands? Two, o' course, what are you——"

"I mean how many hands high was she?"

Mills sniffed sharply. "You c'n rib me, but she was a bit o' real live 'omework, she was, cross me 'eart. An' that's where ole Smithy's gone, back to 'er."

"Don't talk soft," said Russell.

"Oo's talkin' soft, lofty? I knows ole Smithy. Talk the lingo like a native, 'e can. Just as at 'ome over 'ere as 'e would be in Blighty——"

"Doesn't matter if he can talk Chinese," Russell said, "with Jerry all over France."

"Ah, 'e'll get past Jerry, my son, don' you worry. Get dolled up like a Froggie, see, an' make 'is way back there, to 'is girl."

Froome said, "She must be some girl, then."

"I'm tellin' you, aren' I? You wanner listen."

Mills went on talking about Smith, until nobody answered him. He did not mind. He went on thinking about Smith. He'd been tall, ole Smithy, with a way of making you listen to him when he talked. If he only said a couple of words, you knew what he meant. Quiet type, very deep. Romantic, he was. Lived for women. Not in a dirty sort of way, always chasing them and talking about them in the billet—didn't often talk about women at all, when you looked back. But, by God, when you saw one with him, she was a dish, a real dish. Look at her, and you'd come to pieces inside. There was one came to say good-bye to him, up at Caterham, when they were drafted. And Smithy, he'd been very happy-looking, after he'd come back from seeing her off. Women were good for a man like him, did him good, like a tonic. They'd have been bad for anyone else, women with looks like they'd got; but Smithy, he lived for them.

Mills had always sensed, in a vague way, that there was an affinity between Smith and himself. Yet Smith didn't like horses, never looked at them.

He turned over, kicking someone in the leg.

"Sorry, mate."

"Okay."

For a long time, perhaps an hour, no one spoke. The shells came over with such monotony that their point seemed lost. They were as bad as a voice that went on and on; it got on your nerves.

Binns realised after a time that the man over there had stopped moaning. There was another quiet sound, much nearer; a man was talking, in a low mumble. The sibilants came clearly, flicking in the air as dry and quick as grasshoppers.

It was Whiting. He was praying. Binns established the voice, and its tone, and some of the words. Without realising, the kid was speaking more loudly. It was the Lord's Prayer, over and over again.

Beside Binns, Russell moved, stretching himself. He must be listening too; they all must be. The sound became embarrass-

ing. A man had a right to pray, and his God knew he had a reason, here in this place; but there was no point in the way the kid was doing it, over and over again, the same words, putting no meaning into them, no heart. They were like the shells, monotonous. Whiting was taking a chance, thinking there might be some truth in this business of praying to have your life saved; he was not voicing any faith, appealing to any listener. He was staking a late claim in a saviour who was said to be moved by these words.

Pannet spoke.

"Hey, Corp." He spoke very softly, not wanting to interrupt Whiting.

"Yes?"

Pannet shifted over, finding Binns. "What about having a scrounge round?"

"What for?"

"Anything. Grub, some fags."

"Water," Mills said. "I got a thirst like a thistle."

Russell was interested, looking up at Pannet in the glow of the burning town. "Ye'. Let's have a scrump round."

Whiting had stopped.

Froome brought his ration-bag over and put it against the wall, tilting his tin-hat over it, to protect the bottle.

"Are you staying here, Corp?"

"Yes, I think I will."

"Don't let anything happen to this bag, will you?"

"No, I'll look after it. But take your tin-hat with you."

"That's all right, it'll save the bottle if——"

"Take your tin-hat, chum."

Russell stood up, looking round him. Men were lying on the grass, their faces pale in the fire's light; some of them seemed to be sleeping; others talked quietly in groups. Only a few were walking about nearer the canal.

"Where are we going?" Froome asked. He had his tin-hat on.

Pannet said, "There are some cafés, and places like that, down by the bridge."

"Think they'll be open, this time of night?"

"Prat. Come on."

"Hey—is that canal-water any good?"

"What for?"

"Drinking."

"Don't be daft, it's full o' bodies, apart from anything else."

They wandered between groups of others—Russell, Froome and Pannet. The corporal hadn't been keen to come; Mills wanted to rest his ankle; Whiting was busy with his makeshift saviour. Russell said, "Listen."

There were voices, singing, some way off, down by the bridge; it was a strange sound, floating lightly in between the thud of the guns and the crash of their shells, against the soft crackle of the fires.

"Where are they, my cock-os?"

"Down by the bridge."

Froome said, "They're drunks."

They had to dig for the meaning of the word in their memories, finding it among old-fashioned pictures of a Saturday night in Piccadilly, Derby Day, the Boat Race.

"Drunks? Where did they get the stuff, then?"

"We'll find out." Russell went forward, down towards the canal-bank. "Old Milly's got a thirst on him—be nice if we could take him back a bottle o' beer."

"French beer?"

"Better than canal-water, cock-o."

They neared the singing, along the canal-bank. It was a ragged maudlin sound, mixed with laughter of a sort.

Froome said cheerfully, "Bit of a party, Bob."

"You hope."

"We'll raid the joint—those blokes have had enough, by the sound of it."

They stepped over prone sleeping men, passed between others awake. When they spoke, it was quietly.

"Got a fag, mate?"

"Nope."

"Know where there's an M.O.? We got a bloke very bad."

"Muck 'is luck, then."

"Got'ny water, chum?"

"Not a drop."

The faces, the voices, passed behind. Figures stood in the soft glare of the fires, looking at the sky. A man was sobbing his heart out; someone was telling him to shut up, for Christ's sake, shut up.

A group of French people were sitting on the hard earth near the bridge, trying to sort over some rubbish in the soft orange light, talking together. One man was smoking a cigarette; its light smoke tainted the air.

"Streuth," said Froome. "What wouldn't I give for a cigarette, even one of those crappy things . . ."

The singing was louder. They reached a group of huts, some kind of wire fence. A white wall, pink in this light, was ahead of them.

"They're in the cellars."

"Come on, then."

The ground floor of the building—once an estaminet—was deserted; they crunched across a carpet of broken glass, finding a square of light that was a trap-door.

The light came from a candle. The cellar was long, running into gloom at each end. About twenty men were down here, and half a dozen women, two of them young girls, the others older, of any age. One of them, her feet bare, was dancing to a mumble of song, her arms moving and her head thrown back in a pathetic attempt at gaiety; some of the soldiers clapped their hands, clapped, clapped, clapped as she danced for them, their faces feverish with the ghosts of smiles, their eyes bright as she danced.

At the other end of the cellar men were fighting quietly for one of the young girls, pressing one another away as their hands came, jabbing a sly elbow, a word flaring up from the soft, slow scuffle; she was already stripped, and pretending to protest, then joined in with their strained laughter as a man went down on his head with a bottle smashing under him. Those of the men who were not dead-drunk were crowding slowly to this end of the cellar to watch the struggle for the girl; one or two were calling crude encouragement, but most were

silent. It was not an honest, open fight for a woman, in the heat of lust; in the gloom, with only the one candle glimmering on the sweat of their faces and the gleam of their eyes, their movement was slow, a wrestler's movement rather than a boxer's, strength in it but no speed.

The dancer danced on; the other women were trying to pull the men away from where the girl's white skin made a blur in the gloom; they were jealous, and for a few moments held the men's attention; then their jealousy became slowly vicious, and a hand cracked across a face, and a shout went up.

Pannet was sitting half-way down the wooden steps, watching the young prostitute, wondering when she would start wishing to God she'd never come down here; there was no money down here, only men. Froome said:

"Not a good party, ol' boy."

Pannet grinned. "It won't last long, you know."

Russell was picking his way through the crowd, trying to get a footing along the trestles where the barrels stood in a line against the wall. There were three bottles in his battle-dress blouse, clinking together as he moved along, searching for more. They were on the highest shelf, where no one had troubled to reach.

A man knocked into him. "You got big feet, mate."

"You've got a big arse," said Russell cheerfully. He found another bottle, and lowered it gently into his blouse, forcing it among the others.

"You got enough bloody souvenirs?" The man was a drunken Irishman, getting in Russell's way.

"Ye'. What's it to you?"

"Thought you might need a hand." He got one of the bottles half-way out of Russell's battle-dress, and Russell held his wrist, using his left hand because of the glass in his other arm.

"All right, cock-o?" Russell had a big hand, and it was strong. The man's wrist felt soft. He could feel the ligaments pressing away under the flesh as he brought the pressure on. "You all right now?" The man's face was springing with sweat; his eyes were veined by the heat down here, the wine, the

fatigue of the last few weeks. As he brought his other hand up, Russell pushed him backwards and he bounced against a barrel, holding his wrist for a moment and then coming forward, bunched.

On the steps, Froome said:

"Hey, we've got trouble."

"Yes. Come on."

They came down to the fringe of the throng. The girl at the end of the cellar had begun squealing; the men were getting rough, perhaps remembering, in the slow turning of their drunken minds, that tomorrow they would be up there again, under the bombers, that this might be the last time they would ever see or feel a woman. The girl squealed thinly, her voice fluttering like a bird's; a man gave a loud laugh, pretending it was still fun, it was all right, just a bit of fun with the girls; a big laugh, afraid of itself. The other girl was still dancing, now holding a man, making him dance with her; they lurched against the wall, coming down on top of a prone drunk, laughing together; the men who had been clapping out a rhythm for her dance now moved towards her as she struggled to get up, her bare legs waving in the gloom. They did not help her; they moved towards her, while her legs waved stupidly and she stopped laughing, asking someone to help her up.

Russell turned his shoulder against the Irishman as he came, so that the bottles would be safe; he turned his left shoulder, using his left arm, the good one, swinging it across the man's face. There was a hiss of breath and the crack of bone on bone, for the man was drunk enough to run in without thinking to duck. Russell drew in his own breath as he felt the impact. "Poor old cock-o," he said reflectively, turning his head to look.

"Hey, Russell!"

"Ye'?"

It was Froome. "Leave him alone, and we'll go."

"I'm not doin' anything, cock-o." He sounded hurt.

Pannet was grinning, his teeth white in the candlelight. He was looking down at the Irishman. "Well, he thinks you are."

"Come on," said Froome, "before this dump blows up."

The Irishman was trying to pull himself off the floor, using their legs for a grip. Pannet looked down again and put his boot carefully across the man's face. The man began shouting. Froome said, "Look, give me some of those bottles, or you'll break 'em."

"Eh? I'm all right. See if you can find some fags anywhere. Must be some here, the place is full o' smoke."

Froome lurched as a man hit him, and swung up a fist, thinking he was being attacked; but it was a drunk toppling over. He said, "Look, we've got enough booze, let's get out. This lot stinks."

"We can't go back without any fags, cock-o." He went searching along the shelves for another bottle, trying to remember if he'd ever seen Vichy water in a cellar; he didn't think they kept it in cellars. One bottle of Vichy would be worth a dozen of this stuff.

Froome said to Pannet, "Can you look after that bloke, Bob?"

"Good God, he's practically dead."

Froome nodded and went off, looking for anyone who was still half-sober. The trouble was that all the half-sober ones were at the other end of the cellar, crowding round the girl. He pressed among them and said, "Know where there's any fags? Anyone got a fag?" But the girl was giving a scream row, and nobody heard him; they were not interested, anyhow, in a smoke.

The Irishman was trying to get up, and this time Pannet gave him a hand. As soon as the man was on his feet he swung a bunched fist into Pannet's face and Pannet rocked back, lurching forward again as he rebounded on someone's shoulder. He jerked a blow into the Irishman's stomach, doubling him up. "You treacherous sod," he said as the man went down.

Russell was laughing. "Did 'e hit you, cock-o?"

"Yes."

"Hit 'im back, then."

"I have."

"Where is he, then?"

"On the floor again."

"Oh, Christ, it's not his night, is it?"

"Listen, get one more bottle and bloody-well come on out with us."

"You can go an' wait for me. I shan't be long."

"We're not leaving you down here. You'll fetch yourself a load of trouble."

"Who, me? I'm not doin' anything."

Froome came struggling through the pack. The prostitute at the end was screaming. The dancer was still down, her fingers hooked and clawing at any man's face that came within reach of her; they were trying to tear her clothes off. Froome called out, **"Russell! Are you coming, or have we got to slug you and carry you out?"**

"Don't be daft, cock-o——"

"I mean it, you know. Now, come on."

They left the Irishman where he was, lying flat on his face, being sick. Russell had reached the end of the shelves, and had a bottle in each hand.

"Come on," said Froome. "We're going, and you're coming."

"O' course I'm comin', I told you I wouldn't be long. Take one o' these. Where's Paddy?"

"Out for the count. Now, come on."

They got past the woman, who was clawing at whatever she could touch. A friend of hers was helping her, kneeling a big man in the groin. The girl was still screaming, the sound ringing round the walls harshly.

Froome was half-way up the steps. **"Think she's all right?"**

Russell came on, clanking his bottles. **"Ye', she's all right. They can never get enough o' that, for all what they make out they don't like it. Come on, I want some fresh air."**

Pannet was the last to come up the wooden steps. He looked back, undecided. He could see only the white of the girl's body, struggling among the men. She had stopped screaming and was gabbling, her voice hoarse. The men were quiet. The other women did not seem concerned; they were lurching about with the drunks, one of them laughing. The dancer had got to

her feet. Pannet moved to follow the other two; then the girl screamed again; and he stopped again. Did it matter, that a girl was being systematically raped, while the walls shuddered, minute after minute, as the shells went into the town? And if it mattered, what could he do about it? To start a rough-house down here would do no good; the girl could easily finish up with a broken bottle in her face, and she would like that less than this.

"Come on, Bob!"

"I'm coming."

He climbed the last few steps, carrying the two bottles he had taken from Russell. The girl had stopped screaming; and as he left the cellar he realised that he was hoping she would scream again, that the men would go on doing what they were doing. The thought stopped him, and he stood in the half-dark, his feet among the carpet of broken glass, his face lit by the glare from the gaping windows that overlooked the town, as he took a few seconds to worm out his feelings, and look at them. He needed only those few seconds, because the feelings were simple enough. That girl down there was not the only whore in the world; and he was taking his revenge.

"Come on! What're you waiting for?"

The glass tinkled across the boards as he moved his feet, going slowly to the doorway. The door, with lettering on the glass panel, hung open, one hinge broken and the panel cracked across.

Froome and Russell were waiting for him. When he met them, they walked away along the white wall that looked pink in the light of the fires, and clambered over the rickety wire fence, leaving the canal-bank and going across the scrub towards the place where the others were.

An observer-plane was over, prowling in from the sea, flying quite low. The firelight played on its underwings; it moved moth-like and slow, its unseen eyes peering down, dispassionately observing an army of men in the bitterness of their defeat, camped on a foreign shore, the enemy at their backs from the south, the east, the west, at their throats from the air above.

"Oh, God," said Froome, "if I had a gun." He stood still, watching the prowler-plane. He sounded more sincere than Whiting had. "Just a gun good enough to reach up there, and bring that bastard down. God, what'd I give . . ."

They stared at the plane. It was coming back, keeping well clear of the shell-tracks that led to the town, and clear of the great blot of smoke that sagged across the docks and beaches, bloodied by the flames' light.

"I'd give my Benedictine . . ." murmured Froome.

"All their own way," Russell said slowly. "All their own bloody way. The master-race."

They stood watching the plane, hating it. They did not really think the enemy was the master-race; but he was master here.

The shock was sweet. It was a Bofors, knocking away with a sudden rattle that stopped their breath. They could see the wink of its flame; it was some distance from the canal; its rattle went on, knocking in their ribs, stilling them, exciting them. The recco-plane was climbing, standing on its tail. The Bofors kept on banging. A fusillade was going up now from a dozen different places—Lewis guns, rifles, revolvers, anything that had a bullet and a spout and a man's hand to pump it at that hateful thing above them that had come here to look down on their bitterness.

The Bofors kept on banging amid the crackle of small-arms fire, and the aircraft kept on climbing, until they hit the propeller. The engine screamed as the blades went; the machine was poised, stalling in mid-flight, hanging at an impossible angle against the smoke-cloud; then it turned over, flimsy as a leaf, and fell into a glide that brought it back towards the burning town. The engine had been cut off. It came in silence. The guns had stopped, in surprise, in the breathless moment that comes before delight. Then they began again; and with them rose the sound of cheering. It was an animal sound, terrible and magnificent, rising from the dark ground where the glow of the fires was spilled, lighting the faces of a battlefield of men who watched with their eyes bright, their throats full of their late joy at this miracle they

had seen, were seeing still, above them but lower now, lower and larger, tinged with the amber light as the plane twisted towards the earth.

It was trying to find somewhere to land. There was nowhere to land. If it could land, it would not be in any safety. If the pilot walked out of this machine, he would be thrown like a fox to hounds: because he was not just one man; he was the enemy, the total foe who had laid this army here, who would tomorrow be here again to harry it from the high, safe air, hacking at its thousand tired limbs, taking its time.

The Bofors kept on banging, long after the fuel-tanks had burst and the flames came gushing, curling back along the fuselage, slowly enfolding it in a flaring sheath as the nose of the plane lifted, then curved round in a spin as one wing broke away and the machine fell, slow as a burning leaf, reflected for a moment in the calm water of the canal before it reached the earth, and became a funeral pyre, just another heap of flame in the burning night.

The cheer remained, a vast sound, filling the air. For a minute and more it did not die away. When it had gone, these men in their thousands were changed men, by a degree. Some of their heart was back, and their hope, their self-respect. This was absurd, but they did not know it was absurd. God had told them a joke, when they so badly needed to laugh.

They found Binns still standing on the wall with Mills and Whiting.

"Tubby—did you see it? Oh, cock-o . . ."

"Lovely, it was—lovely." Mills said it with a soft croon. "You c'n kiss my arse, but it was lovely, it was."

Froome banged the neck of a bottle against the wall.

"Bring out your mugs, my brothers, for this is Mafeking Night!"

The three of them hopped down from the wall; there were two tin mugs, and they shared them. The wine was thin, poor-bodied but cold; they drank it for their thirst.

Mills said, "Where d'you get it, eh?"

"Local Palais de Danse." Froome broke the neck of another

bottle. "Not a very smart crowd—dress optional."

"No fags?"

"Not even a dog-end. Never mind, we've shot down the bloody enemy, and tomorrow's another day."

Their voices were loud and cheerful. Across the dark land a wave was running, a wave of voices as cheerful as these; the night had lost its quiet, its torpor of drained spirits and weariness and pain. The guns were still pounding the docks; they did not matter. The town burned bright; they could do nothing about it; it gave a cheerful light.

Whiting was sitting on the wall, legs dangling.

"This stuff's all right," he said.

Froome opened the last bottle, neatly snapping the neck.

"It's not the best, but it's booze."

A shout went up, somewhere behind them.

Pannet drained his tin mug. "What's on over there?"

"Another party, ol' cock."

The shouting died away; a single voice rose, giving an order.

Mills said, "'Allo-'allo! Someone's dishin' out fatigues!"

"He'll be lucky."

But they listened. A volley of cheerful questions came from a group near-by:

"Whasser news, then?"

"What you lot on about?"

"Come on, then, tell us!"

Mills said, "Aow, they're on'y 'appy." He was a little that way himself, on a bottle of wine. "A bit of 'appiness makes th' worl' go——"

"Quiet!"

They froze. Someone was coming towards the wall. Some N.C.O. "All right, I want no talking!" They listened willingly. It was good to hear an order, any order, in a strong voice. "You'll pick up your things an' get moving, smartly this way!"

Sounds came; a rifle-butt hit another; a tin mug clanged; a dixie fell and was picked up. Around the wall, men were rising to their feet, the glow of the fires lighting their faces, touching their hands.

"Smartly now!"

They began moving, more quickly, clambering over the wall and dropping with a rattle of equipment. Binns said:

"Where's your tin-hat, Mills?"

"'Ere, Corp, I got it."

"Come on, then, quick."

They bundled over the wall among a pack of others. The N.C.O. was standing on an ammo-box. They could see the chalk-white stripes and a crown.

"All right—follow me!"

He stepped down, kicked the box clear and turned away, going briskly over the rough ground. They came in a ragged mob behind him, slowly jostling into better shape as others directed them at the rear and flanks.

"Where we goin', Tubby?"

"The sea."

Mills hissed, "Well, Jesus wants me fer a sunbeam!"

"Quiet, Milly."

"An' 'ere's me, can't swim a bleedin' stroke——"

"Mills, shut up!"

"Yes, Corp. I was on'y sayin'——"

Whiting dug him in the ribs and he shut up. He was feeling very happy, was Mills. He'd thought he'd never feel happy again, he had, but that's what he was feeling now, he was, bust him. Going paddling, they were—what a turn-up, paddling in the briny; but his dogs could do with it, no error.

The village was on their left, an uneven hump of buildings now silhouetted against the docks. They walked through the shadow of the village and suddenly were among the sand-dunes, tramping through sea-thistle that brushed past their legs.

"'Ere, where's me bucket an' spade?"

"Quiet."

The dunes rose above their heads, their soft curves quiet with rose light in the west, where the town burned, its smoke rolling lazily over the sea and out of sight.

There were men in the dunes already. They were drawn up in groups, each of a score; they were standing, respirators

boxed at the chest, tin-hats on, rifles by their side.

"Hult!"

Men coughed. Sometimes the wind shifted, and a veil of smoke would come drifting over the beach, acrid with sulphur-fumes and monoxide, drying their throats. The staff-sergeant had left them. The new arrivals mingled with those who were here before them.

"What's on, then, eh?"

"What they brought us 'ere for, chum?"

"They're puttin' us off in ships."

"Eh? Where's the ships, then? I can even see the water from 'ere."

"It's not far. Other side o' these sand'ills."

"You seen any ships, then?"

"'Aven't been further than this."

"They've got a bloody hope," Russell said. "Take this lot off in ships? The whole bloody Army's here, cock-o."

"It's not, yer know. A lot of 'em's gone, days ago."

"Days ago? Cor' bli', where've we bin, then?"

"You askin' me, Jock?"

"'Ow'd they get 'em off, then? Not from the flippin' beach, I know."

"Some of 'em wennoff from the docks, see?"

"From where? Don't be daft—they'd get their arse roasted first——"

"Listen, I'm tellin' you, ain' I? We been 'ere all day, see?"

This voice was accepted at once as informative.

"What's it like, then?"

"'Ad Jerry over much?"

"'Ow'd you get on for grub?"

"What's your lot—infantry?"

"Whasser docks like in the daytime, like what they are now?"

Men moved, among other men. Some of the questions were answered; some of the answers were sneered at and disbelieved. Binns was trying to guess how many troops there must be here among the dunes, but it was impossible, for the dunes ran eastwards out of sight, the fire-glow dying away on the smooth

dun faces of the sand. There might be five hundred men here, or ten thousand. No voices were raised, except where an order was shouted, the words chasing each other round the dunes and dropping away to silence.

No one could hear the sea. They said the sea was just through the dunes; but no one could hear it. This could be the middle of the Sahara, or nowhere, nowhere on earth. The flames leapt high as a group of shells dropped into the inferno; the air shivered; the sand went to jelly under their feet, then solidified. A rush of masonry went down with the sound of dry bones rattling among rocks. The shadows of the men moved slowly across the sandhills, ghosts of soldiers, lost in no-man's-land.

"All right—rest easy!"

Faces turned. A man got up, sat down again.

"No talking! No lights!"

The voice was gone again. The massed shadows of the groups of men collapsed as they sat on the sand, their equipment dropping beside them.

"Who's he, then?"

"R.S.M."

"What from?"

"I dunno. Sussex."

"'Ow far does this beach go, chum?"

"Near on twenty mile——"

"Twenty what?"

"Up over the frontier. We come down that way, from La Panne."

"La Panne gone, then?"

"No——"

"Belgium's packed it in—di'n' you know?"

"Well, La Panne hasn' gone. It's H.Q."

"What H.Q.?"

"G.H.Q. Gort, an' the lot——"

"Who?"

"Lord Gort."

"Is 'e 'ere?—'Ey! 'ear that, Taffy? General Gort's 'ere!"

"Don' talk soft——"

" 'E is! I'n' 'e, mate?"

"Gen'ral Gort? Christ, we're all right, then!"

"Any leave goin', Jock?"

A few laughed. A few were not talking, even in a whisper. The guns went on shaking the sand. The shells came over to the docks. The R.S.M. did not come back. The men waited. Some were falling asleep, their nerves reassured by the crashing of the German recco-plane, by the sudden activity following the order to move to the dunes, by the rumour that their Commander-in-Chief was here, somewhere with them in the night, in this strange, embittered night that was now less hideous because of these things.

Corporal Binns sat with his party; they spoke very little, for they were still lulled by the wine they had drunk. Their stomachs were empty, but they were not hungry. In the open air a man could do without sleep, without food, for as long as he must. But Mills was sleeping, his bone-hard monkey's body drawn up on the sand, his head cradled on Whiting's lap.

Somewhere behind the dunes, transport was coming down to the shore, along some road, across some bridge, the engines trudging in low gear, the tailboards banging over the bumps. A motor-cycle was leading the column; they drove without lights.

Quietly Russell said, "We're goin' to Blighty, then, Tubby."

"It looks like it."

"Well, it'll do me. What about you?"

"If we've got to go, we'll go."

"Well, cheer up, cock-o. We'll see a bit of home."

"Yes." Binns thought of Margaret, and the children. They would still be there. The last letter had come a long time ago; he did not know how long: weeks or a month; a day was like a week, sometimes; other times it went in a flash. But they would still be there, and with luck he would see them soon. He thought with sudden pity of the French refugees; there was time now to think about them, and about France. This land was France, this rough sand where he sat, sulking because his Army had lost a fight. How did they think, then, over here, the

French, in their beloved France? There was no home now for them. The Boche was here, and the British were getting out, leaving the Boche behind them across the face of France. How did the French think, then, about the British? Should that woman have pitied the few scruffy soldiers she had seen on the rubbish-dump? Should those others, who had been strewn along the road, their road, have made way for the transport column, and waved them by? Perhaps; perhaps to both, but only perhaps. The pigeon-holes had become relics of an ordered age: the French, the Belgian, the British, the civilians and the soldiers were people in a crisis, human beings finding their different levels in their differing conditions: you are hungry: I am starving; you are in pain: I am dying; your mother is far away: mine is dead; but we know one thing in common: that this is war.

Binns raised his head, opening his eyes. Something had happened. He could not think what it was. Something had changed, while he had been thinking.

"Cock-o."

"Yes?"

"They've stopped."

"What have?"

"The guns."

Binns waited. A minute passed. He said, "Yes."

The night was free at last of the pounding; the air was clear; the ground did not shake any more.

"What they stopped for, then?"

"Hallo, Milly—thought you were asleep."

"'Ow the 'ell can I sleep, wi' no noise goin' on?"

They listened to the peace. It was not silent, because of the burning town and the lorries that were moving down to the beach, but it was peaceful.

A man near them said, "Is the bloody war over, then?"

Binns had a sudden start of fear. Had someone, somewhere, surrendered? Were they prisoners now, by order? Suppose a signal had gone out from La Panne, reporting that the situation was impossible, that the Army could neither fight back nor be evacuated from a patch of sand and a burned-out

harbour . . . suppose the signal had come back: Then save the men. Surrender.

Froome said, "They've run out of ammo."

"Who, Jerry? That'll be the day."

"They can't keep it up for ever."

Binns thought: They've ceased fire, because there's no point in filling a ruin with more shells. Dunkerque's had it, and they're satisfied. That's why they've stopped.

"It's nice, i'n'it?" said Mills. "Makes a change, do'n'it?"

Pannet said nothing. Like Binns, he was uneasy. It did not occur to him that the B.E.F. had surrendered; but he distrusted silence, after so long. The sound of guns was a thing he had learned to live with, and now he felt out of his element.

"Listen."

Mills sat with his head tilted, his face puckered.

In a minute, Froome said, "Planes."

Russell said, "Ye'."

Binns said with relief, "That's why the guns've stopped, then—they're sending bombers in."

"Well, you needn't be so bloody cheerful about it, cock-o."

They fell silent again, and listened. The drone was coming from the east, towards Belgium. Their faces slowly turned that way. To the east the sky was clear; there was no cloud, and the smoke from the town lay behind them.

Slowly the drone loudened, and took on the rhythmic throb of engines at variance. They had not heard a sound so great as this, from aircraft; there must be many of them coming. They could not be seen yet; even in daylight they would be difficult to see, at this distance. The men among the sand-dunes turned their heads, sometimes thinking that the sound was diminishing, that the bombers were flying north or south; but it was the wind shifting, carrying the drone away, dispersing it, then bringing it back, more loudly, each time more loudly than before.

"Heading this way," said Pannet.

"Ye'. Ye'."

Very softly, Whiting was saying, "Oh, God . . . Oh, God," under his breath.

The waiting was a strain on them. This was the worst: having to wait. Yet, when the Stukas had come screaming down with the finned bombs whistling, exploding on the earth almost before you heard the planes coming, that was the worst, too. And when you saw that the guns were getting the range and beginning to fire salvos, and you knew that your unit was the target, that, also, was the worst. You had no comparison to make, none that you could remember, because, lying on your stomach in the ditch, praying you will get out alive this time, just this time, you could not remember the other times, when you had been somewhere else, praying the same prayer. Every time, wherever you were, it was always the worst.

Yet there was an added subtlety, in waiting. A man had time to think, to remember he was responsible for his past, and that he had left so many things undone that with more kindness or less sloth he might have done: small things, silly things, the slapping of a child who cried because it was tired, and not naughty; the forgotten birthday of a relative, perhaps even a relative you had never cared about; the missed chance of . . . dear God, how many missed chances there had been . . . and the mean tricks, and the deaf ears, and the lost loves. . . . so many things; and a man could have time to think about them now, while there were these few minutes left, minutes luxuriously long, in which to look back on a whole life, and regret so much of it, and know that all those things were now too late to mend, and all those joys could never come again. Perhaps waiting was the worst, by a degree.

Waiting, a man like Corporal Binns could think about his home, and what it would be like when she had the telegram, and had to tell the children, and his father. He had never been utterly indispensable in that house, although it was his own; very seldom is anyone really indispensable, because it depends on time, and memory, and habit, as much as on bread-winning, duty and devotion. But he would be missed, because the marriage was still happy: not so exciting as it had been five years ago, but, in a way, happier than then. He would be missed, badly, for a time; and they would all think the best of him, leaving out the missed chances, the deaf ears—not the

mean tricks or the lost loves, because he could really say this: there had never been a mean trick, and his only love was Margaret, and would always be, even if he could never tell her again.

Listening to the throb of the unseen engines, a man like Russell could think about his friends, at home: he was a man of friends, with no wife, no great love of women but a manner of love for friends. They'd miss him, down Streatham Hill, at the Blue Bear, and at Mac's place; but they'd have to get on without him, that was all there was to it. Good luck to the lot of them; they were good puck-os, every one.

A man like Froome could think about the different kind of life he had planned to lead, after this was over. He'd been a sponger on his mother for too long, had drifted, not giving a damn. He had been going to change all that, or nearly all. There would have been girls again, but they would have been different, maybe not so many of them, not so many beds to wake in when morning came, with the same dull daylight question: What could I have seen in her last night? Different girls, there would have been. What would their names have been?

A man like Pannet, waiting here in the dunes, could think about his wife—and he was not the only one, here in the dunes, with a wife like his. His mind could circle, in these calm luxurious minutes, from picturing her as a filthy little bitch fit for raping like the whore in the cellar, to seeing the more realistic side of a marriage such as theirs. He had married Joan because she was sexy. Sex was in her body, her eyes, her voice, her hands; and they had married because whenever they looked at each other they itched for bed. He had been away three months now. Before they had met she had slept with a dozen men, maybe more; he had never asked; then she met him and they had given each other all they had wanted; now she was a celibate—or had been, for a little while. Did he expect her to wait for years? How long would this war last? How many leaves? Were they both to be rationed, taking their fill during snatched meetings, with no time for anything else? And if he did not expect her to wait for years, then for how long? A month, for decency? Two, out of sentiment? Three, with her

nerves playing up? Where could he draw a line? And why had he never seen it like this before? She was a bitch, leave him that; but not a whore. A whore made love for the sake of anything but love—for money, a job, a reward; and God knew she never did that; she liked it too much, delighting in every minute. A bitch, not a whore. If he ever got to London, could he see it like this, over there, near her, touching her? He'd try.

Waiting for the bombers, a man like Whiting could only think: I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

Mills thought: You bastards. You bastards, you.

The drone loudened. The only thing they did not think about, these thousand—perhaps ten thousand—men, was the unthinkable compromise. maiming.

Voices began, quietly, for the sake of relief.

"Can you see 'em?"

"No."

"There's a packet of 'em."

"Ye'."

"We oughter run."

"Where to?"

"They might not be comin' for us."

" 'Course not, mate, they're just on a bloody exercise."

The drone was louder, now, than the sound of the burning town. The throb of the engines' variance scooped the drone into waves that rose and fell, beating against the ear.

Humour was lost as the nerves tautened, stretching across the long seconds.

"There's a packet, all right."

"All right, there's a packet. Not deaf, are we?"

"We can't stand 'ere an jus' wait for 'em to——"

"What else can we muckin' well do, fer muck's sake?"

"P'r'aps they're just on their way down the coast——"

"You poor prat—they're for us, don' you know? They're for us!"

"I don't want to die——"

"You might 'ave to, chum."

"I don't want to die——"

"You might 'ave to."

TEN

OUT of the east sky, the raiders came into sight as the fires' light reached their wings, tinting the dark with orange and defining them. In a little while it could be seen that they were heavy bombers, twin-engined machines, massed at one level, not very high. As they ran into the glow from the ground they became dull red crosses moving over the stars, so that a man born before the aeroplane would have said he saw a dreadful vision, a graveyard in the sky, with each cross as red as blood; and his vision would not have been without true portent, for there were many among the dunes who would live no longer than a minute now.

As the bomb-doors opened, the finned shapes could be seen in the glow; they too were red, and their hue brightened as they sloped towards the earth, tilting slowly, nosing down and becoming larger and still more bright in the few last seconds before instinct clenched the eyes and flung the body down with hands digging into the sand and breath choking in the throat because the scream could not get out, or because the will to suffer this much dread in silence was greater than the urge to seek relief by voicing it.

The night retched, in agony. The dunes were shocked in the sudden massed blast of explosive that lit them with a fierce electric glare that was snuffed in the next second by the flying sand. The sand flew, mist-thick, smoke-dark, from dune to dune, clouding the air; and in the heart of it men cried out, those who were alive, and went on driving with their hands into the sand, burrowing there blindly, while the drone diminished, and the cloud thinned, and the sand fell in soft waves over them.

The raiders came back. They had turned inland, avoiding the warm air that was rising from the town, and came back from the south-west, forced to turn as they made their run-in, so that their path should again run parallel with the beach. Of the few men who still cried out, some were silenced, this time;

but others voiced their fear or their pain, thinly in the din of the engines and the bombs.

The sand came falling softly, scattering across a face, burying a hand, drifting over men and the bodies of men and men who were not alive nor dead, unconscious men, some of whom would wake, and others never. The sand fell kindly, clouding down. In the east sky the red crosses were dulling away to darkness; the throb lifted; the drone died; until, after minutes, the raiders were gone.

Men got up, many of them astonished because they were still alive and could stand on their feet like this, when the bombs had come so near them, their percussion winding them, sending them deaf—so near that before they had shut their eyes and thrown themselves down they had seen the bombs coming in a long direct rush above their heads. And yet . . . They stood paralysed for a while, trying to see, digging the sand from their eyes, spitting it from their mouths. Sand was everywhere; it trickled down inside their shirts as they stood up; it fell from their ears as they shook their heads; it was in their boots, their hair.

They listened. The bombers had gone. They watched the sky. Gone, all gone. It was over, and they were alive. Who else was alive?

“Bert. You okay, Bert?”

“Geordie. Where are you?”

“You all right, mate? All right, are you?”

“Taff! Taffy!”

“Where’s Jock?”

“Lofty, you okay, mate?”

“Paddy! Mick!”

And others, thousands of others. Most of them answered; a few did not.

“Tubby! Okay, cock-o?”

“Yes. You?”

“Ye’. Ye’. Christ . . .”

Someone laughed. Pannet. He said, “Quieter now, isn’t it?”

Someone was sobbing. Whiting. He was still lying down,

his head half-buried in sand. His body shook. Binns said:

"All right, kid, they've gone."

Froome was trying to remember: had he been shouting when the bombs were coming down? He couldn't remember. Someone had been shouting. It might have been himself. What had he shouted? Words? He seemed to remember words. His legs were wet; the trousers were soaked. But he was getting his breath back, slowly.

"Okay, Whiting," Binns said. "On your feet." They would have to stop him somehow.

"Well, stone th' bleedin' crows!" Mills sounded very indignant. "I've gone an' wet meself!"

Froome felt better. "Good man—so've I!"

"You 'ave? An' not a fresh bloody nappy in th' place!"

Russell was bending over Whiting, trying to move him. The sobbing had stopped, but he didn't move.

"Come on, my little puck-o. Rise an' shine!"

Whiting began mumbling, a fast, soft, bubbling flow of words, gibberish.

"All right, get up, Whiting."

Sand fell away from him as he moved. Russell gave him a hand. "We thought you'd got buried, cock-o—where've you been?"

Mills said, "Well, I dunno, I arn'arf ashamed o' myself, straight. Told Ethel I was 'ouse-trained, when I led 'er up the aisle."

"Think they'll come back?" said Froome. It was the first time anyone had mentioned the planes.

"Ye'. When they've loaded up again."

"Charming."

A voice called thinly from the dunes, "You lot all right?"

"Yes! Are you?"

"Not a scratch!"

Russell pulled Whiting to his feet. He was still shaking badly, but his mouth was shut. In the glow of the fires his face looked dead, the skin so bloodless that even the glow did not give colour. His eyes were open, staring at nothing.

"That's it, cock-o. Never say die!"

Whiting turned away and began retching.

Mills said, "Yer know, we couldn't never be safer than we are 'ere."

Pannet asked mildly, "How safe is that?"

"No, you know what I mean—it's this 'ere sand. They carn do nu'ink, see, with bombs, not on this stuff, see what I mean?"

"You're probably right," Binns said. "It'd be different, on rocks——"

"Tha's what I mean, see? We're all right 'ere."

Pannet said, "Oh, well, that's fine," and looked up at the sky.

Whiting was still making a noise, moving away from them. He was not the only one: many had had their stomachs turned sick from shock. The noise alone, of the engines and then the bombs, had been more than stomachs could contend with, quite apart from fear.

The ground trembled. The barrage had begun again.

"Jesus Christ," said Pannet, irritated, "what the hell do they want to keep on shelling for? Can't the silly bastards see the town's gone for a Burton?"

Binns said, "They're firing over the town, at the docks. At the harbour itself."

"But the harbour's on fire, too."

"The water isn't. Where there's water, there can be ships. That's what the guns are after."

Mills said, "What about the planes, then, Corp? Why di'n' they bomb the 'arbour, 'stead of 'ere?"

"They can see better, from above, what to bomb."

"May their eyes cross, then."

"Listen!"

"What, cock-o?"

"Bein' moved again."

They listened. Men were picking up their equipment, near them among the dunes. An order was called.

"Where are they——"

"Right! Any of you lads hurt?" The R.S.M. was suddenly here, out of the shadows. Binns said:

"No, sir."

"Right. You're moving down to the water. There's small boats there. They'll be takin' you out to the ships. Some of you might have to wade out—it's very shallow, even for the small boats. Keep your equipment dry. Keep together, don't panic, obey orders an' you'll get to Blighty. Right—follow me!"

Mills peered round him, and saw Whiting, ready to fall in line. They moved over the soft drifts of sand, making their way through the dunes with the long sharp grass and thistle brushing their legs. The glow threw their shadows faintly against the sand; then they were lost in almost pitch dark as a dune rose on their left, hiding the town. Froome tripped, cursed and found his feet. It had not been a rock or timber lying in his path; it had been soft, and silent.

"God, whassat?"

It was a sound; they could not tell what it came from. From something alive, or half-alive, down among them in the dark.

Binns stumbled, going down with his arms flung out.

"Watch your step, that party!"

Binns scrambled up. His left hand, that had broken his fall, had sand sticking to it; the sand was moist here, sticky. He wiped it quickly on his khaki, wanting it clean. Someone pitched against the man in front of him; the sand was holed here; there had been a bomb here. The breath was scraping in Russell's throat, and Binns heard it. Mike was all right when he was being shot at or bombed; it was the sight or the presence of blood, and distorted life, that turned his stomach.

The dunes fell away, admitting the rose light and the crackle of the town. And they saw the beach now, the vast flat of sand, sloping away to the sea's edge. Dimly they could see small boats bobbing, beyond the men who were crowded here as thick as a forest, from the dunes towards the surf.

"Streuth. . . . look at 'em . . ."

"No talking!"

Other groups joined them as they came to the firm flat sand. The men, standing massed in the gloom, were silent, but an order came sharply, here, there, behind, beyond, as groups were

selected and mustered and then ordered to move down. There was an atmosphere of quiet organisation here that did good to Corporal Binns, to all of them.

There was no talking, but against the crackle of the fires and the regular thump of the guns there was a background: the soft, indefinable, unmistakable sound of a great crowd, waiting.

"Halt."

The scuffle of feet died.

"Wait there. No talking."

They looked around them. It was not possible to see more than that they were some fifty yards from the water's edge, surrounded by other groups as quiet and as motionless as themselves. They could hear the water now, for the first time since they had crossed from England at the beginning of a war that had never started and was suddenly over. It had been cold then, with bleak rains and a rough sea: many of these had been brought to France before Christmas; others had sailed through bitter January nights, disembarking and driving south over icy roads, across a landscape brittle with frost. Now it was mild, and the sea was milk-smooth in the night, the surf creaming softly along the sand where men were wading out to the bobbing boats.

Russell whispered, "Tubby."

"M'm?"

"See that?"

"What?"

"Ship. Over there."

Binns saw it, now. "Yes."

"What a bloody size . . . it's a battleship."

"No, but it's big."

Now that they had stopped peering about them at the crowded beach, they could make out the shipping. The light of the town gleamed here and there on a piece of brasswork, a glass port-hole, on the movement of water as a boat turned, an oar dipped, a rope fell. There was a fleet, out there, gathered in the night, with the lean shapes of destroyers standing off, too far away to catch the glow but large enough to be seen as

shadows along the horizon of the sea. Nearer, the sharper lines of smaller ships, riding at anchor and blacked-out: and then the flotilla of boats whose shallow draught could bring them close in to the shore.

Russell murmured, "I said they'd need some ships . . . an' by God, they've got 'em."

"They won't take us off tonight."

"What've they brought us down here for, then?"

"In case there's a chance, p'r'aps."

A group near them began moving off, on a quiet order. A low rattle of rowlocks was sounding along the shore. Light flashed on the rush of water as small boats jostled there, nosed in to the sand. Men were boarding them; boots banged on timber; the water lapped. Others were wading out to larger boats, to launches and motored craft: the water was churned as they went through the shallows waist-deep, their equipment above their heads. Engines were running softly; the pale crescent of a wake drew out across the dark, and another; another; the power-boats turned, ploughing to sea with their heavy loads.

A second group moved down, halting by the water's edge to wait its turn. In half an hour a third group took its place. Men were coming down from the dunes, some of them with stretchers slung between. Engines murmured inland, as trucks crawled down from the roads.

They had forgotten the guns. Shells burst with monotony along the waterside where the long mole reached out from the docks; their sound was so regular that it had become unnoticeable; but now an explosion came that was different from the rest: a sharper crash, metallic, hollowed out of the night; then the uproar of flames that gushed from the heart of the explosion. It was a ship, hit where it lay in the harbour. Fire covered it within seconds, casting a flare of feverish light across the water, silhouetting the dark ranks of men who were packed along the mole.

"They've got one, cock-o."

"They've been trying long enough."

"The bastards," said Mills, "the bastards." He put his

whole heart into the words, giving them the full strength of a curse.

Whiting said, "When are we going? When'll they take us off?"

"I don't know. We'll just have to wait."

They waited, watching the ship. They waited until dawn.

"You were right, cock-o."

"Yes."

It was morning; the night was ending, and they had not been taken off the beach. They were chilled now, and their eyes were sore with watching, with keeping open. Up in the quiet of the dunes they might have slept; but down here, with hope rising whenever an order was called, they had not slept. They had watched the water, and waited, hoping; but the corporal had been right.

It had been eerie during the last few hours. All night, men had been coming in from the canal-roads, in orderly parties or straggling in groups, dropping among the dunes to sleep exhausted, or moving down to the beach, not certain where they were, unsure of these other silent men who were here in their thousands, waiting through the night. A man did not know who was beside him in the gloom, until a word came, in English, or a star-shell lit the scene, enabling him to look at his companions. There were men here who never spoke, who wore neither uniform nor civilian clothes, but a mixture of both. There were French soldiers here, and French civilians—soldiers in uniform and in borrowed calico, civilians in calico and borrowed uniform—and there were Polish miners, Belgian refugees, and many people whose identity or business here could never be known: the fifth column was here, working quietly in the night, listening to officers who were making their plans for the morrow, watching the sky for planes, moving among the defeated Army, slipping a knife to a man's heart and sidling on, taking a rifle from an inert hand and making quietly off, working in small ways, nibbling at the reserves of the enemy and undermining his hopes of a mass escape.

The shelling had stopped, a little before dawn. The sky was

calm. The dock area was a jumbled ember. Smoke drifted still from the storage-tanks and refineries to the west of the town. The ship in the harbour was gutted, with the blackened skeleton of its superstructure poking thin bones from the water. Activity off-shore had never ceased. Somehow, men had been taken to boats; the boats had nosed seawards to the great shadows that were ships; anchor-chains had rattled; winches had screamed; screws had turned; the big shadows had lost their feeble substance, and had gone, leaving a black horizon.

Activity, out there on the water, had never ceased; yet when dawn came, throwing a flood of grey light across the scene, it seemed that not a man could have left the beach, for the beach was still a forest of dark figures, waiting.

Until the first bombers came, the greatest noise was from the south: from the French and British guns that were still positioned in serried rearguard lines landwards of the Dunkerque perimeter, holding off the German advance on three fronts while the evacuation was pressed on with along the shore from Dunkerque to La Panne. Transport was coming in through the canal area, the crews uninformed of the orders to disable and abandon their trucks and equipment.

Then the first raid came, from the air, soon after dawn: two squadrons of Heinkels driving across from the east and dropping their loads. The slow movement of men that had already started toward the dunes now quickened; and the dunes filled again; and the open beach was bare, but for the thin orderly lines of men winding down to the sea, queueing for the boats.

Corporal Binns's party was still intact. Whiting had been missing for an hour, but had come back, soaked from the waist down with sea-water. No one asked him where he had been; and he said nothing. Russell had gone off with Froome, foraging for anything they could find: food, water, cigarettes, chocolate, chewing-gum; but they had come back with no more than a handful of broken biscuits and a mugful of water that smelt too stale to trust: so they had thrown it away.

They crouched in the dunes now by daylight, the six of them among their party of twenty with Corporal Binns in charge.

The raiders were going back eastwards, to refuel and load up. Warships, standing off-shore, were shelling German positions beyond the perimeter; their fire was answered by heavy artillery whose shells plucked up fountains from the sea, sometimes hitting a ship and blowing it out of the water, while the Army watched from the dunes.

They had not realised, until daylight, the size of the armada that had come here to fetch them home. They had imagined, during the long painful night, a few small craft plying between the beach and a group of bigger ships. They could review, now that it was light, a fleet of vessels so large that it reached from east to west and from here to the horizon: a fleet so variegated that the sight of an Indian canoe or a Chinese junk might not have called for surprise. The Mosquito Flotilla was spread out across the shallows—rowing-boats, dinghies, cockle-boats and ships'-boats, massed along the surf, milling with men who waded out to them, swam out, rode out on a tyre or a plank or a box, eager to feel timber beneath their feet and know that the Channel was below them: the English Channel instead of a foreign shore.

Behind these tiny craft lay power-boats, launches, yachts, fishing-boats from Plymouth, tugs from the Thames, lighters, barges, pleasure-boats, drifters and trawlers, taking on the loads from the little boats and turning seawards, some setting course for England, others gi'ng up their cargoes to the destroyers, sloops, minesweepers, M.T.B.s and corvettes that waited farther out, circling slowly to give the swarming aircraft fewer chances of a hit. But there were hits, as the morning drew on and the planes came in. Boats went down without a murmur, their crews and passengers swimming clear; or they were blown out of the water, half their complement dead before they could drown; or they were hit amidships and broke in two, settling with their boilers bursting and only a handful of men floating clear, and only a pathetic few of these lasting long enough to be picked up before they were gone from sight. Ships died in many ways, their men with them: in strange ways and hideous ways, rolling in agony with their decks awash and going down keel to sky, sliding away without

a sound and leaving a swirl of men alive and dead men in their wake, going down stern first, bows first, draped in a sail, smothered in steam, covered in crude oil, swathed in flame: in all ways, and all of them terrible, ships died in the jammed seaway, battered by the land-based guns, broken with bombs, raked with machine-gun fire, blown up by mines. In all ways, as terrible, men died in the water. They had reached here painfully; this had been their goal; and here they died in the super-trap, with no chance of striking back.

The others, many of whom were going to die in the same bitter way, watched from the beaches and the dunes. They had never thought of the English Channel as an enemy before; it had always been a friend, historic in their defence. Now it was a barrier, lying implacably between them and their island, between England and her sons. They did not feel themselves to be the sons of England, on this day. Their spirit was unbroken, and there was fight in them still—they could have turned even this bloody tide of war if they could have been given arms and a means of striking back; but they were here at the end of a retreat, and in retreat the heart of a soldier flickers low. It is like taking the wrong road, losing the way, going in the opposite direction and running on, knowing that time and distance have gone into reverse. Better to stand still, entrenched, besieged, unyielding, holding the position for months on end, than to turn back, and reach the starting-point in a few weeks of flight.

Comrades of theirs, the Guards, a few miles inland from Dunkerque, were not in flight, nor would ever be. The sound of their guns was constant in the background as they kept up the barrier between the enemy and the shore. They would never be here; there would never be ships for them; their future was the grave and the prison-camp; their goal would be reached by proxy, as the ships crossed the Channel and the men went home. Only when the last of them had gone to England could that magnificent barrier go down, leaving the enemy to pick among a gutted town, a shattered dock, and a few bare miles of littered beach, bleak with the wreckage of an army that had gone.

In the dunes, and among the winding snake-lines of men six-

deep down the shelving sand, it was impossible to know how nightfall would ever be reached. Each man, stationed in his group, queueing in his line, sheltering in the shallow cave he had dug with his hands from the dunes, could only hope that there was a ship for him and for his friends. The size of their situation, its gravity, its organisation, its chance of success, were beyond their ken; they lived this day in local ignorance. They believed there might be ten thousand of them here, still waiting to be saved; they could not know that there were fifteen times that number, or that one hundred and eighty thousand had already been taken off, homeward across the sea. They could only wait, and try to believe their turn would come, in time.

As they waited, bombarded, machine-gunned, shelled, they were beset by natural forces whose energies were more subtle: hunger, thirst, and sickness; and these were more dangerous to their morale than the incessant din of attack. Officers had organised foraging-parties, trying to locate supplies and spread them thinly among the men. A water-and-ration ship was expected, and troops stood prepared to bring its cargo ashore and distribute it; but the ship was not in sight. It might have gone to the bottom, might never come. Not far off-shore, the *Bideford* lay aground, her stern blown off. The *Crested Eagle* was high and dry, burned-out. Other ships lay stranded by the tide, shifting drunkenly to a light swell that hampered the smaller boats in their feverish work.

The lines of men reached down to the sea, snaking across the sand: lines that had scarcely moved since dawn, held back by the turn of the tide and the running swell, while men boarded the smaller boats only to capsize them, waded out with their equipment, only to drown, swam half-naked to the larger ships, only to go under before they could reach their sides.

Before noon, the men at Bray Dunes heard engines nearing, from the open scrubland near the village. Lorries were coming down, crawling through the sandhills in convoy, speeding up as men fell away and left a path for them. They ran on towards the sea: ten-ton Scammels, Bedfords, Chevrolets, Citroëns and Renaults, trucks and tenders, carriers and thirty-hundred-

weights; so that local excitement rose as the men watched them rolling by.

"You drivin' across the Channel, then?"

"Give us a lift, mate!"

"You got yer water-wings on?"

"Yer won't get to Lunnnon, Charlie—the roads're flooded!"

The convoy ran on, down the slope of the sand.

Russell, lying flat on the brow of a dune, watched the lorries go past below him. "They've gone mad, cock-o! The lot of 'em's run amok!"

The first Scammell hit the water, its front wheels ploughing through the surf, bringing up a great white bow-wave as it shuddered on, cleaving a path between bobbing boats, leading the convoy out. A flight of Dorniers was over, streaking for the east mole with the bomb-doors opening, but they went unnoticed as the men watched the lorries go into the sea. Already it was clear that they had not run amok, that there was organisation here of a brilliant kind.

"Tubby!"

"What?"

"They're buildin' a bloody pier!"

"A what?"

The lorries ran down two abreast, wheels churning through the sand, plunging after the three-tonners into the surf, piling up behind until the vanguard stopped, their engines blocked by the deluge of water. The others drove on, closing the gaps, shunting to a halt with the water up to their cabs.

Mills stood upright, shielding his eyes.

"A flippin' pier! What they think this is—Soufend?"

Men were active along the convoy, bringing boxes, planks, canvas, decking-panels from the bridging-lorries, collecting webbing, fabricating a walkway across the vehicles as boats came in, nosing toward the pier that now stretched solidly into the sea.

"Up the R.E.s! Look at 'em!" Mills was hopping about on the sand, taut as a pert sparrow with excitement as the lines of men converged towards the pier, moving along it to the fleet of waiting boats. Raiders were still overhead; shells were

dropping from the land-based guns; a destroyer was going down stern first, ablaze; Heinkels were coming in from the east to strafe the beaches and the east mole; but the snake-lines were on the move again, and the boats were taking on men. The sea conditions—the hampering swell and the tide of the turn—were minimised, and evacuation was proceeding. As the first troops ran on to the pier, to run the obstacle race along the half-submerged vehicles, a cheer went up from those waiting behind them. This was a new hope, badly needed.

Corporal Binns brought his party down to the deeper safety of the dunes. They had seen enough. Perhaps, if they could keep their minds from food, from water, from sleep, they could go down again to the beach, and this time find a boat.

“What’s the chances now, Corp?”

“Better.”

“Take us off today, will they?”

“They’ll try. We’re not the only ones.”

“If on’y these bleedin’ planes’d sheer off, we’d ’ave more chance.”

“If only I had a gun. One ack-ack gun, and plenty of ammo . . .”

“If your mates’d come over in some o’ their famous Spitfires, it’d make a diff’rence! Where the ’ell they got to, for Chri’ sake?”

Froome said, “They must be up there, somewhere——”

“Somewhere’s not ’ere, is it?”

Froome and Pannet could not tell if Mills were serious, directing his feelings against them because of their uniform. It would be understandable. Mills wasn’t the only one who was asking where the R.A.F. had got to. All morning the sky had loosed aircraft at the beaches and the harbour: enemy aircraft weaving above the lines of men, the crowded dunes, the packed east mole, diving, bombing, machine-gunning, harrying the men, scattering the boats, sowing mines among the bigger ships, their work unmolested from the air. On the sands, damage was not great; it required almost a direct hit to kill a man, to blow a group apart, for the soft terrain muffled the effectiveness of the bombs; but it was an attack almost without cessation, its

tumult a grave strain on the nerves. One successful challenge from an Allied squadron would have eased the bitterness that was now rife; the Army would have been content to see even a glimpse of the R.A.F., would have believed that somewhere above the clouds an effort was being made to protect them from the Luftwaffe. This was denied them; they could not be blamed for their ignorance of the truth of things: that the whole strength of the Air Force had long ago been thrown into the arena, down to the sacred Metropolitan Reserve whose single duty had been the safeguarding of London itself.

Of the enemy bombers that were driving across Dunkerque and the beaches east of it, many had reached there through a maze of dog-fights above the clouds; many did not return to base after dropping their loads and meeting attacks on the homeward run. But the British fighter groups, taking off from Kent and south-east airfields throughout the day, were already low in fuel by the time they closed with the enemy formations, and could give battle only for minutes before they were forced to turn for home with emptying tanks.

Only a few, at G.H.Q., La Panne, and at Naval Command, Dunkerque, realised the value of their air support. The men on the beaches, exposed in their tens of thousands to the shadows of enemy wings, could look upwards and see nothing but the German cross and the gaping bomb-doors, hear nothing but the nerve-stripping Stuka scream and the rattle of strafing guns, feel nothing but the shuddering sand as the bombs came down among them with terrible monotony, unrelieved except when the enemy chose to withdraw and refuel his busy machines.

Mills was not the only one with bitterness in him. It was no better, for that. Pannet told him:

"You don't imagine our blokes are sitting on their bums in England, do you, with this lot on?"

"They're sittin' on 'em somewhere, then. They're not 'ere, are they?"

"We don't know how many of these are getting through——"

"Don' we? The bloody lot, if you ask me! The sky's full o'

the bastards. 'Gettin' through'? It's a joy-ride fer Jerry, anyone c'n see that!"

"We can't take-off without orders, can we?"

"Aah, they got no guts——"

"They might not've got orders——"

"They'd be 'ere, orders or no, if they 'ad th' guts——"

"Don't be a bloody——"

"Cut that out." Corporal Binns was crouched sideways in one of the pits they had scooped from the sand; he was watching the pier of lorries and the lines of men.

"'E's not goin' to tell me that out o' the 'ole bloody R.A.F. they can't muster a few bloody——"

"How d'you know there's——"

"I said cut that out, Mills! And you two! That's an order—all right?"

Mills muttered a word. Pannet and Froome sat in silence, irked, secretly feeling themselves that their Service was letting them down, unable to admit it, determined to deny it but with no faith to back their argument. This had to be suffered, too, alongside hunger and thirst and weariness and the unrelenting attack from the air.

Binns watched the boats. One must concentrate on the boats, on the thought of getting to England, even as late as this. One must believe that one would not die here, blown to shreds in the flying sand; believe that the war was not finished yet, that there would be another chance; believe that this gigantic effort was not to be for nothing, that this mass of men would fight again, somewhere, with new equipment and new heart. Without this faith, improvised as it was for an emergency, a man could only lie down and await his unimportant, isolated end, pitying himself, wishing himself dead before the bomb came for him. This faith was hard to find, but it could bring ease when a man had it; and he could lie here and watch the boats, and believe that one of them would come for him, before the bullet or the bomb.

"'Aircut! Free 'aircut! Roll up—free 'aircut!"

The voice startled them. A sapper was waddling round the dune, stepping over prone men, snipping at the air with a pair

of scissors. "Come on, then, let's 'ave you, you 'airy lot o' mokes!"

Mills said, "I wanner shave, mate! Got a razor?"

"Can't 'ave a shave—on'y 'ave 'aircut! Get yer bib on!"

He draped a square of cloth over Mills's shoulders with an expert flourish: it might have been part of a sheet or a night-shirt. "You want any left on the top, chum?" He began work with the scissors while the others watched, glad of a diversion.

"'Course I want some left!" bawled Mills, and made a grab at the bib.

"All right—keep yer 'air on till I c'n get at it, then!"

"You scalp me, an' I'll brain yer, straight!"

Planes came over with a rush of sound, streaking for the docks. Mills straightened up when they were gone. "'Ere, listen, Charlie-boy, you mind them bleedin' shears! I don' wantem in my ear'ole ev'ry time they drops a bomb! You go careful now, see? Ne' mind about my 'air, I want me 'ead left on, you unnerstand?"

"Blimey, ain't you sensitive, 'Umphrey? Now 'old still a minute, can't yer?"

They watched Mills, delighted, as he crouched like a broken-down monkey, glaring up at the sapper.

"Tubby."

"What?"

"Let's go an' see if we can find out what's happening."

"Happening?"

"When we can get taken off."

"If you like."

Russell stood up. "Never mind, Milly, we'll get you a wig!"

"Listen, 'ere, if this geyser don't go careful, I'll——"

"Keep still, can't yer?"

Binns stood up and said to Froome, "We'll be away half an hour. Don't move from here unless you're ordered to."

Froome was hunched in a shallow of the sand, hugging his knees. "Right you are, Corp."

Mills jerked round. "It's no good givin' 'im orders, Corp'ral —'e's in the bloody R.A.F."

Binns stood over Mills. The sapper paused in his snipping.

"Listen, Mills. If it weren't for what you call the bloody R.A.F., we mightn't be here now. You might not remember much about it, because Pannet and Froome carried you into their dug-out unconscious—but you looked grateful enough in the morning, when you were tucking into their grub. So you can shut your bloody mouth from now on, about the R.A.F. If the rest of them are like these two, I'm satisfied."

He turned away. "Come on, Mike."

"Ye'."

The scissors began snipping again; but they heard no voice as they left.

Russell said, "It was about time he was told to——"

"Let's forget it."

"Ye'."

They walked down to the beach, making for a group of N.C.O.s who were shepherding one of the lines. Before they reached there, bombers came down in a strung-out line, diving into their run. Russell and Binns lay prone, side by side, their ears blocked by the familiar din. When they got up they saw the line reforming, with the ease of long habit. They walked towards it, across the cratered sand.

The day was ending: the day they had thought could never end, leaving them still here and alive. Shreds of cloud, flecked and bloodied by the sun, were festooned beyond the town to the west. Planes had not been over here for an hour, but candles for the coming night were already lit: three ships burned brightly out to sea; buildings in the dock area shed the glare of a false sunset across the beaches to the east. Smoke hung in a thick canopy, half-way across the sea, stagnant in the windless evening. Men in their thousands had left the harbour and the shore in the last twelve hours; thousands remained, packed along the mile-long mole, strung out in their sinuous lines across the sand, encamped for the night in the shelter of the dunes.

They had learned nothing, Russell and Binns, from the men in charge of the boarding-parties—except that they must wait

their turn. They had come back to the dunes, to find the others in better spirit: the ration-ship had arrived, and supplies had been distributed. Water was still scarce, and the cans were opened with care, poured sparingly into mugs and savoured to the dregs; but a biscuit and a drop to drink worked miracles.

The guns inland were still keeping up their fire; beyond them, the British rearguard units were holding the barrier hard. A ship lay half below the surface, near the end of the long east mole, abandoned and derelict, a target for bombers that had dived upon it a score of times, thinking that it rode untouched, waiting to enter harbour. Smaller fires had been lit at sea and were burning still as the daylight waned; nearer them, light craft were massed, silhouetted against the flames.

Activity increased, with the going down of the sun. The lines of men were moving faster now towards the root of the east mole, towards the clusters of boats along the shore, and along the pier of trucks that jutted into the sea, shortened now by the rising of the tide.

The shout of orders loudened, sounding in waves along the dunes, as groups were brought down to the beaches, tacking on to the lines.

Soon after dusk, Binns left his party and was gone for half an hour. The others talked, or slept, or sat thinking of the ships. Russell was telling Whiting about the motor trade, back home in civvy street, about the tricks he got up to, the cars he used to drive—any story that came into his head, because Whiting needed to have his mind off the present. The present was bad, for a man like him: it had no end. Whiting listened, sometimes saying a word, asking a question, grateful to Russell for these fairy-tales of a lost world.

Mills was sitting alone, mending his boots with some wire he had found, sitting in silence. Froome and Pannet talked, their voices low. Like Russell, they were remembering home, and London, and the people who had been there with them, sharing the nervous prelude to this insanity.

Binns came back quickly into the dunes, reaching them out of breath.

"All right—we're going."

"What?"

"Another false alarm . . ."

"Come on, let's have you, quick!"

They got to their feet, picking up their things. Binns stood for a moment getting his breath. He had been running for half a mile among the dunes, losing his way a dozen times before he could find his party.

"We really got a boat, Tubby?"

"Yes. Quick, though—after me."

They followed him, leaving the dunes and straggling down the firm sand at the double, falling-in behind a line of men six deep in the evening light, their heads turning as others came up, their voices raised with child-like eagerness:

"We got a boat!"

"Come on, chum, we're goin'!"

"Any more for the *Skylark*?"

Someone was bound to say that. They were all of them bound to say something, to relieve this strange light-headed sense of hope that leapt inside them at a time when hope had seemed long dead in the littered sands at their feet.

Then they had to wait. The little excitement was over; they relaxed, overtaken by the weariness they thought they had left behind them in the dunes. They had to wait. They knew how to wait. They had waited here for their lives, patient for dear life. Now they would wait again.

It was another false alarm. The corporal knew that, as well as they did. They'd been brought down here before, just to watch the others board the boats. It made a change, waiting here instead of up there. They didn't mind. But they didn't want to buy any line of bull about being taken home. They wanted to know where they were: and they were here. Waiting.

The British guns trembled in the south. The enemy guns shuddered, nearer the coast. The shells dropped seawards, hitting the water, hitting a ship, lighting another fire. A ship went down, its blaze extinguished; another took its place, adding its ruddled light to the beacons across the sea. A smaller boat capsized in a rush of foam. Men cried out and

began swimming. Some of them drowned. A motor throbbed; a wake went curling away. An order was called; men moved in a sluggish mass along the shore. The beacons glimmered, out to sea. A shell struck; a ship went down; another sprouted flames. The enemy guns shuddered, near the coast. The British guns trembled to the south. The scene had not changed. It would never change, except when daylight differed from dark. This was Dunkerque; they had learned the name for this.

Whiting stood in line, beside the others. He was not praying; he was beyond praying; he had forgotten his prayers and his silent, bitter resolve to get out of this and get home, and then desert, and burn his uniform, and never fight again. He stood with the others, watching the glow of the fires across the sea, the flare of the docks, the dusting of pale stars above his head; he stood thinking of nothing, his mind a blank, recording the light of the flames and the sound of the guns and the feel of the sand under foot.

Pannet had slept for an hour during the day, and so was wakeful now, alerted and with his nerves tuned to the sight and sound of the struggle that was going on as night came down: the struggle of an army to free itself from a trap, the biggest trap in the history of war. He was lulled sometimes into thoughts of home, of his wife, of the empty flat; but it was easy to drop these thoughts and let them rot, and turn his mind to the present. He did not care, overmuch, if there were a boat for him. He would board one, if ordered; he would stay here, if not. There was nowhere to return to: the Boche was there; nowhere to sail for, except an empty home. He waited with the patience of indifference.

Froome still smarted under the barracking that he and Pannet had suffered during the day. Mills had not been the only one. Cries had come from other groups as men had moved about. Look who's here, boys—the bloody R.A.F. . . . we wondered where they were! Lost yer little aeroplane, sonny? Whatter shame! Why don't you go 'ome, chum, an' join your bloody mates? Tell 'em we got a war on, 'ere, in case they didn't know! With many of them, anger had been real;

others had been derisive, even pitying. Froome had taken most of it in silence, and had once told Corporal Binns that he and Pannet would like to go off on their own, relieving the group of its embarrassment. Binns had said that if he could believe in this shambles of an Army, he could believe in the R.A.F. He had added that he was glad to have them under his orders, and that they were to stay. It had been an oddly formal scene, enacted apart from the others; they had been forced for a moment to consider values and loyalties, responsibility and discipline; not gifted with the tact of dissenting generals nor with the freedom of equal rank, they had edged their way through the matter with rough courtesy, aware of the ludicrous unimportance of their situation in this deadly maelstrom, but conscious that to each of them respect was due from the other: respect and understanding. They had managed well enough, and were glad when the moment was over. But Froome still smarted, thinking of the day, still watching the sky for the glimpse of even one night-fighter to restore his spirit. The sky was empty now, but for the glow of fire against scattered cloud. Even the hated cross was gone, leaving the night in peace.

Mills felt cool about the head. That geezer had given him a proper doing with the shears, all right. But it had passed the time, and had amused the others. Someone had to act the clown, and he was small, and had the energy. He had always been the funny one, good for a laugh, all his life. There were worse roles; he didn't mind. He didn't feel very funny now, as he stood with the others, half-way down the line that snaked to the foot of the pier. The corp was right. The two erks had helped them just when they were down and out, giving them a good night's kip and a handsome scoff in the morning; and all he could think about now was why the Air Force wasn't here. It wasn't their fault. They didn't run the Raff. They wanted to see a Spitfire, too—even more than he did, because they could feel proud of it, and he could only be glad. Maybe it had been his nerves. Or his empty stomach. Or the strain of always being the clown, the funny one. These things, plus others: his lingering sense of class-distinction, a hangover from civvy street

that had made him dislike these two because they didn't happen to drop their aitches, didn't wear khaki dog-collars, talked about bloody Benedictine in that la-di-da bloody tone. But that hadn't stopped them mucking-in, sharing their food and fags and shelter with five blokes they'd never set eyes on before. He went over all this again, understanding half of it, making up the rest, trying to justify his outburst, trying to excuse himself and then trying to screw himself up to making an apology. The corp had got it right. He ought to say he was sorry; but they wouldn't take any notice, because it wasn't funny, apologising wasn't; they wouldn't take it seriously, from this little runt, little Milly. Or would they? He was perched on the brink again, watching Froome's dark form beside him.

Russell watched the sea. That's where they'd be going, if they were lucky: out there. Was it worth it, mother dear? On shore it was safe enough, now; but out there it didn't look healthy. The guns had got the range; they weren't aiming at any particular ship; all they had to do was keep the range and sweep their fire east-west, and one shell out of ten would have to hit something. And there were the mines, sown by aircraft during the day. You'd see a ship go up of a sudden when the shells weren't coming over. And there were E-boats out there, too, because one of the destroyers had been letting off a salvo every minute for a long time now, firing straight out to sea, shifting the bearing, shifting it back; and another one had joined in, a minute ago. It made you half-hope you wouldn't get a boat. On the sand you could run or duck if anything came over; but out there, packed in the hold of a ship, you couldn't lift a finger to stop yourself being blown to bits. It was a turn-up, this—you tramp half across France and get here by the skin of your teeth, and then, when you see a chance of sailing for Blighty, you have to stand here and wonder what they're going to send for you, a ship or a coffin. It was narking.

Corporal Binns had not spoken for an hour. In an hour the line of men had shortened by fifty yards. How many men, six deep, in fifty yards? How many boats were ready? Could they go tonight, he and his mates? If not, there'd be another day here, in the dunes. Could they stand it for another day? He

could. Mike could. Mills could; he'd give a bit of trouble, but he wouldn't break down. Pannet and Froome were all right; they'd stand up to the Germans if they could only stand up to the English and their cat-calls and sneers. While he had been away, finding out the position, he had heard an officer sending an R.A.F. corporal to the stores-dump behind the dunes, telling him to change his uniform, get into khaki, for the sake of peace and quiet. It was becoming as bad as that. It would be worse tomorrow, if there were no British planes in the sky.

He wasn't certain of Whiting. The kid was holding out, raking up his reserves from somewhere; but he was the kind who would crack suddenly, without warning. He might stand another day, might not. It wouldn't make much difference, only to Whiting; but it would be good to see him get through, right through to England, after all he had faced so far. If they had to stay here tomorrow, he would help the kid a bit more, try to give him a word or two, at the right time, steady him up.

Binns watched the sea, thinking over the best and the worst of the day. The best had been when the rations had arrived; that had changed their feelings, more than anything; it was a short enough way from a man's stomach to his heart, in a place like this. The worst had been when he had lost his way among the dunes, trying to reach his group. The padre had been standing half-way along the trench in the sand, holding the Bible, with the wind moving his thin fringe of hair, fluttering at the pages of the book. Along the other side of the trench were a dozen men, with a few spades between them. The planes had come over from the east, where the padre was facing. He hadn't glanced up at them even when the air was thick with their sound-blast. His voice had been smothered, that was all; and he had shut his eyes for a moment, frowning. The men on the other side had itched to turn their heads when the planes had come into their run, but they had watched the padre, waiting for him to look up from the book, their thoughts almost forcing him to look up; but he had not. And when the planes were overhead, filling them with the terror of sheer noise,

they had wanted to jump down into the trench and shelter with the dead.

He watched the sea now, and forced himself to think practically, unbiased by hope or fear: what were the chances of reaching England, across those fires, through that scum of stricken ships? Fifty-fifty, maybe better. That wasn't bad. About the same chance as they would have of living through another day on the beaches. And whatever chance they had, they had no choice. If a boat came for them, they would board it. Keep in line, obey orders, unburdened by any choice. That made things very much better.

He spoke at last.

"Mike."

"Ye'?"

"I think we'll get off tonight."

"Ye'? Why?"

"There's more boats now than there were an hour back."

"I was thinkin' that, too."

They shuffled forward as the line moved, following the guide-tapes in the gloom.

"We'll try to get on the same boat."

" 'Course, cock-o. 'Course."

An officer was shouting, down by the pier. A group of men moved in from the flank, carrying wounded. Their feet churned the wet sand, where the tide had gone down, leaving a waste of pale phosphorescence. Their dark figures moved in the glow, strangely, as if they moved in the performance of an evil rite, during a heathen mass, with this macabre luminosity turning their faces grey, shining against their eyes.

Between the lines of men, the open beach was darker than where the May Rot was gleaming along the lower sand. Higher, the ground was littered with equipment cast aside, with the wreckage of bombs, with ammo-boxes, webbing, the remnants of kits, biscuit-tins, shreds of uniform, discarded boots, the bric-à-brac of five days' desperate activity in the face of fierce attack. Shapes stuck out of the sand and were lit by the glow of the fires; shapes so odd that they were indefinable, so grotesque that they changed their form as the imagination

worked on them; yet they were ordinary things: a stretcher, a truck-wheel, a body, a box, a stack of implements, a broken rifle, a human limb, a petrol-stove, the body of a horse, the accumulating rubbish of a war that no one would have time to sweep away, except the sea.

"All right—hurry it up!"

The line moved down, following the tapes. Men moved across the phosphorescent sand, picking their way through a mirage in the dark.

"Smartly now! You want to be left behind?"

Boots shuffled; shoulders pressed close. The boats were coming in, loading up, turning back as the oars dipped and the motors throbbed and the men were taken away.

Planes were in the sky towards midnight. A flock of star-shells hung clustered, high up, dispersing as they floated down, shedding a febrile light across the sea. The planes neared, hunting invisibly, circling the area and then nosing in, darting down, a black shape swift as a fish, dropping its spawn and rising, vanishing, followed by a burst of ack-ack from guns along the canals, traced for an instant by the sweeping arm of a searchlight, and then lost. Somewhere a ship reeled, ripped open by blast; a brighter bloom of flame spread blossoming across the sea.

"Corp!"

"Yes?"

"'Ere's the pier!"

"Yes."

"Not long now, eh?"

"No. Not long."

Men were leaving the line, dodging into the surf and wading out to where small boats rocked, eager for cargo. The line was breaking up at the edges, but a central file moved on, reaching the pier and clambering down the walkway, tripping, righting, moving on, faster than the men could cope with, over the obstacles of rolled canvas and truck-cabs and shifting planks, while the boats came alongside, bobbing in the shallows, their crews keeping their balance, reaching out for the men as the men dropped, tumbling aboard, leaping across a gap and

missing a boat and landing with a splash, to shake themselves and wade to the nearest gunwale and pull themselves across.

"Lively, then! Come on!"

"Drop your kit, that man, and get aboard!"

"Sergeant, look to that boat and get it clear!"

"Smartly, then—let's be 'avin' you!"

The pier shuddered to the tramp of boots. The water was alive. A man pitched down, cracking his head, lying unnoticed. A man fell into the sea and stayed there, feeble with his wounds; and the water closed. An oar rose, digging into the sand, thrusting away. A dinghy shipped water and settled, lamented with shouts. The line came on, leaping across the sand, along the pier, into the surf as the men came to the boats and the crews made steady under the flying onslaught, holding hard.

"Mike——"

"All right, cock-o!"

"Get Whiting!"

"What?"

They pulled the kid aboard, soaked and inert, dumping him in the bows, leaving him to deal with another of his many little deaths that the shock of the water had dealt him.

"Ken!"

"I'm here."

The boat lurched, drawing water in.

"Shove over an' sit down!"

A blue jersey, a brown arm, a voice with salt in it—the oars banged through the rowlocks and the dinghy turned, finding an even keel and slopping away with its gunwales half-awash, wallowing under the burden of fourteen men, nosing through the pack of bobbing timber to deep water beyond.

ELEVEN

THERE had been no time to think about what was happening. They had waited, some of them, for two days and a night, encamped on the sand, sleepless in the dark hours, crouched by daylight under the rain of bombs and machine-gun fire, their every minute filled with hideous experience between intervals of relief when the heart could sink at the thought of a future no different from the past. Now they had left the land behind.

Some were on the borderline of sleep of a kind, lulled by the motion of the boat, believing that they would soon be back among the dunes and safe in hell again. They were too bewildered, in their exhaustion, to think otherwise. They remembered the dunes; they had spent their life there, all the life they could recall without effort; they would be taken back. That was their home: the soft sand, the prone men at their side, the scream of planes, the bombs, the pluming bullet-tracks. Lying in the boat, slumped arm-to-arm, drifting from dream to reality and back, they thought of the Dunkerque dunes and were homesick for hell.

Others, more wakeful, concentrated on keeping still as the dinghy ploughed on: a boat built for three, wallowing slow as a turtle beneath the weight of four men and the boatman who plied the oars. A few talked, in low voices.

"Bob—look."

"What?"

"That fishing-boat. Twickenham."

"Twickenham . . . my God."

There were other names, lettered in brown and black and gold on the sterns of other boats: boats that had come across Channel from Maidenhead, Richmond, and Hampton Court . . . the Thames, the Medway, the Arun . . . river-boats brought from the creeks and willows of quiet reaches, sea-salt unknown along their timbers until now. And the names of bigger boats, motor and steam and sail, civil and naval craft, were picked out by those awake: *Our Bairns*, the *Gracie Fields*,

Polly Johnson, the Duchess of Fife, the Gallant, the Golden Gift
. . . boats from the rivers and ports and harbours of the island in the north, manned by their owners, their friends and volunteers, full-crew or half-crew, sailing under command of the Navy, many of their pilots learning only now the reason for their urgent summoning.

"Mike."

"Ye'?"

"Destroyer."

"Ye'. We goin' on that?"

Mills spoke to the seaman. "We goin' on that one, mate?"

The man said nothing, needing his breath; moreover, he did not know. He must bend these oars till they broke or the dinghy reached a ship or failed, foundering.

Binns watched the beach. It was alive with men who were crowded along the surf, breaking away from the lines and wading for the boats that had come in at nightfall to take off as many as they could before daybreak and the bombers came. From here, the beach looked narrow, the dunes no higher than mole-hills. The sky beyond them was pocked with flickering light as the guns kept up their fire. Shells from the German emplacement were streaking overhead, hitting the sea behind, raising a clear fountain or crashing among the boats. Far out, the guns of a warship sounded, answering the shore-based fire.

Men were calling from near-by, and Binns turned his head, shifting his weight as little as he could. The destroyer was close, bows-on, tall in the glare of the night. The boatman grunted.

"That's us." The oars creaked. His face streamed with sweat.

Some of them twisted round, the better to see; the dinghy ran low, dipping to one side.

"Sit still or ye'll have us under!"

A light winked from the destroyer, briefly, and went out. Dark figures were grouped along the rails. Already men from a launch were climbing the landing-nets on her beam, and seamen were pulling them aboard. The launch rocked clear, turning back for the beach as the dinghy reached the nets.

"Easy now—easy, for God's love!"

Russell struck out, grabbing the mesh, pulling himself clear of the dinghy as Binns came with him, hanging from one hand, keeping the boat closed-in with his dangling feet while the others came swarming, one of them going down with a splash and vanishing.

"Easy—take it slow!" The boatman was slinging water out with a baler as it poured in over the bows; but the weight was coming off and she was riding higher, half-flooded but well afloat.

"Whiting—grab my legs!"

"I can't—I can't——"

"Grab 'em, sod you!"

"I can't swim—I can't——"

"Mike!"

"I've got 'im——"

"Mills—you 'right?"

"I'm comin', don' you worry!"

The dinghy rocked. The nets trembled. The men went up. Pannet was near the top. Froome was below, with Russell. Russell had Whiting by one arm, but his grip was slipping.

"Hang on, can't you? For Chri' sake get——"

Pannet was coming down to help. Froome had Whiting by his belt and was struggling to stay on the net. Two or three of the others were closing in, and one of them slung Whiting across his back and climbed with him, half-choked by the grip of his arms, trying to swear at him, climbing hard while Russell came with them, boosting them up from below.

Binns called, "Where's that man?"

"What man?"

"One went overboard." He clung to the mesh, trying to see below him. The dinghy was pulling away.

"We lost 'im!" It was the boatman calling. "We lost 'im, son!"

Binns climbed slowly to the deck, and Froome grabbed him as he came over. Froome, Mike, Pannet, Whiting, Mills—they were all here. The deck was crowded, with no more room below. Seamen were elbowing past. "All right, mates, now just keep out of our way!"

The nets came up. The ship was moving. The men slumped against the rails, drawing their feet up to leave a gangway for the crew. Many of them were already seasick; others fell into sleep, pole-axed by exhaustion, dimly conscious that the fight was over and that they were safe now, and could slide into oblivion.

A shell plummeted close across the bridge, hitting a Dutch *schuit* and blowing the bows apart. A welter of blazing wreckage came fluting through the air, dropping across the decks of the destroyer and scattering the men. A bell was clanging; orders were raised; the wreckage was hurled overboard piece by piece, picked up and flung with bare hands as the men worked at it in the glare of the burning Dutchman; then she fell astern, mast crippled and bows down. A minute, and she was gone, and the water was bobbing with heads. Only a few men were striking out for the nearest boat, their arms flurrying the surface below the drift of smoke.

Against the rails, his hands blistered from their work with the wreckage, Pannet was losing consciousness, part of his brain drugged by the exhaustion of weeks, part struggling to keep awake, believing this to be death, this black drift into coma; he fought with it, the remnants of logic warning him that there was water below him and flame around him, that he would drown here, or burn alive, if he let himself go under. "Ken . . . Ken . . ."

"You're okay, we're all okay——"

"I've had it, Ken; I'm on my——"

"You're okay. Let it ride, ol' boy."

Binns lay beside Whiting, his voice low as he went on driving the words in. "You'll have to help yourself as much as you can. You could've climbed those nets better than us; you just didn't make yourself. If we stay on this ship you'll be all right, but if anything happens you'll have to brace up and look after yourself. We'll help, just the same; but we don't like helping a man who won't even try. You've got to try, you get that?"

Binns had found the word, the only word. Try. You can't ask a coward to be brave; but you can tell him to try. Better to try than go under.

"You've got to try, you understand?"

"Yes, Corp." He lay with his eyes shut, feeling seasick.

"You won't get through if you don't. You want to get home, remember that. If you try, you'll do it all right; and remember we're with you, all of the way. It's a lot easier when you fight back and kick things in the teeth. Make up your mind you're going to get home, and you'll be all right."

The kid's face was white. When he opened his eyes, they were dark hollows in the pastiness. The words were slurred.

"Yes, Corp. I'll try. I won't let you down."

Binns said, "The one you'd be letting down is yourself." He left Whiting, and crawled over to where Russell sat.

"Hallo, cock-o."

"You all right, Mike?"

"Ye'. Bit green. You?"

"It doesn't worry me."

"The sea doesn't worry me either; I'd be all right if all these pucker'd stop throwing up all over the deck."

Binns leaned against the bulkhead, shutting his eyes. His stomach was a good sailor, but a lot of the others were feeling it badly. Seasickness wasn't funny, not at the time. Binns knew that, although it had never troubled him. Jill and Bobbie were the ones for that, poor little devils. Dying to go on the paddleboat, pleading for weeks before the summer holidays, saying they'd be all right, they wouldn't be sick again, ever again . . . and there they were, hanging on to the rails, with Margaret bending over them, trying to help, sorry for the nippers, worried about the other people, vowing never to bring them on a boat again, ever again—"We knew this would happen, dear, it's no good saying we didn't. It happens every time, and we can't blame them; it's our own fault, for giving way."

"P'raps we can get something to stop it. There's pills, for seasickness——"

"I'm not giving them drugs, I can tell you——"

"They're not drugs. P'raps they'll grow out of it."

"What, cock-o?"

"P'raps they'll grow—they'll grow——"

"What's that, cock-o?"

"Nothing."

The wind of the ship's passage sang past. The men were bringing up bile; there was no food in them. They were doubled over their sickness, hoping to die. It hadn't been enough, getting across France with the weight of the Boche on top of them as they pushed on without sleep or food or a smoke; hadn't been enough to lie there on the sand, the air choked with sulphur-fumes from the bombs, thick with the ripping bullets from dawn to dusk; there had to be this as well, the retching and the agonised gasping for breath, the wishing to die, the devitalising torture that nothing could ever stop, until they were off this filthy, cursed ship that was taking them home with their lives.

"What did you say, cock-o?"

"Nothing. I was muttering in my sleep."

"You go to sleep, then. I'll watch out."

"I'm all right. You feeling better?"

"Ye'. Ye'." He rolled over suddenly and crawled his way to the rails.

Binns shut his eyes again. The burned flesh of his shoulder felt as though it were peeling away, all the time, burning away as the air streamed past, flaring across the flesh where the khaki was open, a ring of scorched cloth. His eyes were swimming with the pain, and with the soreness of fatigue, and with the acrid smoke that had drifted among the dunes, across the beach, over the water here. Tears fell slowly down his face over the stubble, making channels in the dirt, while his eyes burned, awash with the hot salt water that was cleansing them as he sat here, one leg sticking out of the remains of his uniform, white as a bone, one hand caked with the blood of the wound that had reopened every day since he and Mike and Dave had lain there under the long-drawn scream of the Stukas, so very long ago. The deck rose beneath his body, fell beneath him, lulling him as the destroyer ran on through the night.

When he opened his eyes he could still see the dunes, small as a strip of corrugated cardboard, silhouetted by the gun-flashes behind them. The town was a tumbled ember heaped on the dark line of the shore.

Russell was crawling back, to lie with his legs drawn up. Binns put one arm round his shoulders.

"Won't be long now, Mike. We're over the worst."

"Ye'."

The deck rose beneath them, fell beneath them; the wind streamed past.

The first torpedo-track had crossed the bows fifteen or twenty seconds ago, a long white feather of foam. The second came beam-on and struck the destroyer dead amidships, breaking it in half. Of the six hundred men on board, more than half were killed in the instant; the rest suffering the actual knowledge that the ship was hit. Of these, very few lived longer than a matter of minutes as the boilers burst and the destroyer broke into two halves, settling with her midship sections going down first to the shallow bottom and her bows and stern poking upwards through the mill-race of the surface, where smoke and steam enveloped the wreckage as it spread out through the widening track of burning oil.

Of the bare hundred left alive, most had been on deck at bows and stern; the explosion had not reached them, and they had been thrown clear of the billow of scalding steam when the boilers had gone up. They were pitched against rails and bulkheads and cables as the two halves settled; many of them, too weak from accumulated exhaustion and seasickness to free themselves, went down entangled, helplessly drawn under. Others, not granted this mercy, fell clear of the wreckage and came up within the spreading track of the blazing oil, and died less easily as their minutes ran out, dragging through horror. These died crazy. A few men, whose number would never be properly counted, were pitched clear of the wreckage and clear of the oil, and were free to sink back into their exhaustion and shock and sickness to an easier end, by drowning. Others were stronger and began swimming or floundering either in panic or with the will to save themselves, keeping afloat, turning away from the glare of the oil, calling out, threshing in the water, with no real knowledge other than that air must be sucked in, and that they must not go under.

There were perhaps thirty or forty of these, out of the six

hundred. They were still deafened by the explosion, still blinded by the shock and the water and the glare of the oil; but they were fully alive and physically unhurt. As their heads cleared and they began thinking, they called out again, this time not to God or their mothers but to their friends. Names fluttered across the water. There was a name for the man who swam strongly, his head and shoulders clear; a name for the one who was floating on his back, his arms propelling him almost idly away from the oil with the calm purpose of a good swimmer; a name for the body that was drifting face-down; for the shape that was caught among wreckage, for the shadows that were sinking unseen below the littered surface.

Answers came, after a little while; and men swam towards each other, some of them laughing with cracked, meaningless voices, relieving some of the shock, believing it was funny to find a friend of theirs still here, hearing their own laughter and feeling it was strange; but it didn't matter: Jock was alive, and going like a fish; and Eddie was over there, trying to get a grip on a bit of flotsam; trust Eddie to find himself a bloody raft and get himself organised, trust him.

"Mike! Mike . . ."

Silence, to that one.

Others were shouting, their voices strong. There were dark bows, creaming through the water, the foam tinged yellow by the flames as they died away across the oil. On this night, no ship was far from another; a man might be dead, or dying, or floating unconscious, or striking out to save himself; he was never alone. There was an army drawn up across this sea tonight.

"Mike! Mike!"

The boat came weaving among them, its engine throbbing, seamen hooked across the gunwales grabbing for treasure, hauling it aboard. A seaplane-tender was moving in, already packed with men but searching for more. A minesweeper was heaving-to. A drifter stood by, lowering boats. In the dying glow of the oil-flames men worked in silence from their boats, moving among the wreckage and the shoal of men and bodies of men, taking what they could from the littered sea.

A shell raised a fountain, bursting between the drifter and the

motor-boat; the force of its explosion spun the motor-boat round, flinging half the men in her overboard. A Dutch *schuit* was coming in, laden from Bray Dunes; her crew began work among the men who were now swimming again for their lives. Somewhere in mid-water, torpedoes were running; a destroyer, passing the rescue group, suffered a hit towards her stern; other ships converged, changing their course and lowering boats as the destroyer settled, ablaze.

A Thames tug, running out from the beaches, holed on both sides by the last bomber-raid of the day, her compass gone and her rudder half-jammed, was reeling slowly towards the group, her crew at the ready with ropes. Behind her came a destroyer, towing a paddle-boat whose upper deck was shattered and the funnel gone. Landing-nets were down as the destroyer slowed, lowering her one remaining boat.

Nearly two hours after Binns had hit the water, he was dragged aboard a barge, towed by a tug that was itself crippled and taken in tow by a minesweeper as the group began breaking up and heading for mid-Channel. Binns was unconscious, lying in a soaked heap among coal-dust amidships, jammed by the pack of men. When he came-to, he spent a long time working out the immediate past. Much of it was forgotten, except for flitting images of experience: water, flame, smoke, water, voices, an explosion, hands, ropes, timber, water, Mike . . . Mike. . . . He was here, somewhere, on this boat. Was this a boat? Here somewhere, aboard. Had been with him, before. When was that—before?

“Mike.”

He sat up painfully. His stomach was bruised. Salt water still poured from his nose. His head throbbed.

“Mike.”

A man slumped down as he moved away from them, and stood swaying, trying to see their faces; but it was almost dark, with only a pale flush against objects and men, the fringe of a far light as a ship burned.

“Mike!”

A shadow shambled towards him. “Ye’.” It fell against him and they swayed together. “Cock-o . . .”

Binns held him, not speaking. Breath was pumping in and out of Russell's lungs; his head lolled against Binns. The barge wallowed, snatching at the tow-rope. The air streamed past, foetid with fumes.

Binns doubled up at the knees and they sat down together, hunched against a pile of rope, supporting each other. He remembered more clearly now. He had been going under, and Mike had kept him afloat. They had been sliding about on a fin of wreckage, and its edge had caught Binns across the stomach. That was when he had passed out.

"Thanks," he said in a moment.

"Wha'? What, cock-o'?"

"Thanks."

"You're a'right. We're a'right."

"Yes."

He got up again soon, leaving Russell in a sleeping heap. He stepped over legs, bodies, heads, rubbish, crunching through coal-dust.

"Mills. Mills."

The great rope snatched; the barge loped forward, with water slopping over the side. A man was singing a hymn.

"Whiting."

A group of shells came down astern, knocking the breath out of the night. Spray fell, driving cold across the barge; but nothing was hit.

"Pannet. Froome. Mills! *Mills!*"

"Shuddup, carn' you? Gi' us a bit o' peace, mate."

He tried to see their faces; their faces were all the same, dark hollows of eyes that by daylight would be bright red, set in shadows, holes for mouths. The tow-rope jerked; he fell across a man, and got up again.

"Easy, mate."

"Pannet. Froome!"

"Shut it up, fer Chri' sake."

He stumbled, clutching at a man to keep his balance. He was near the bows now, with the salt wind flat against his face, refreshing him. Out beyond the bows the big rope sang, with water streaming from its curve,

whipping upwards in a long white spray as the slack took up.

"Mills. Mills!"

"That you, Corp?"

He fell against timber, grazing his wrist. A hand caught him. He fell down, crumpling at the knees, and knelt as if praying.

"Mills——"

"I'm 'ere, Corp! All right, are you, eh?"

"Yes. You?"

"Couldn' be better! 'Omeward bloody bound, us, eh?" He peered into Binns's face, trying to see how far gone he was, how much he needed humouring, consoling.

"Whiting—you see Whiting?" Binns's knees collapsed and he sat down, lurching against someone.

"We lost 'im, Corp."

"What happened?"

"That kid Froome 'ad 'im, swimmin' with 'im. Then Whiting started goin' wild. You know. Panickin'. 'E got Froome under twice. Time I got to 'em, the kid was under fer good, see?"

"Did you look for him?"

"I couldn'. I was gettin' Froome to the boat, see? 'E was out, cold, be then."

"Where's Froome?"

"They took 'im off of me. I don' know where 'e is now, but they got him all right, I know that much. Couple o' tars got 'im."

"See Pannet?"

"'E's 'ere, in this lot. Sick as a dog. 'E'll be okay. You got Lofty, 'ave yer, Corp?"

"Lofty? Yes. Lofty's all right. Is that all?"

"Eh?"

"All of us? Our lot——"

"Tha's right, yes. All okay, 'cep' fer the kid."

Binns sank his head down, lying curled up against Mills.

It was still night. It was not dark, because of the flames. The minesweeper was hit, burning badly aft. The heat came across in waves, the smoke enveloping the crippled tug and gusting

back across the barge. Men were shouting, on the minesweeper and the tug.

Binns regained consciousness and saw men around him, their faces orange in the glare. He flung out an arm, "Mike!"

Mills said, "They got the one in front, Corp!"

"Where's Mi—what you say?"

"Ship 'it. Look." -

The barge was yawing, her way lost. Men were standing up. One of them went pitching overboard. Timber was crackling; sparks were coming over, blowing in the smoke. The tug's hooter was sounding in distress. Then they were dropping back as the rope was struck between the minesweeper and the tug. The 'sweeper was turning, settling at the stern, the flames licking along the surface of the sea.

A ship was hove-to, not far off. A fishing-boat, running empty southwards for loading at Dunkerque, swung about and came nosing into the glare. Men were floating clear of the minesweeper and striking out for the tug; some reached the barge, and were hauled inboard.

"Tubby!"

"Here, Mike!"

" 'Allo, Lofty—where you bin?"

"Christ, look at that lot . . ."

The minesweeper was well down, her bows lifting as the stern took in the sea. The blaze died, hissing under the smoke. Heads bobbed in a group as men drew together, coming for the barge and the tug. The tow-rope had fallen slack, under-water between them.

The fishing-boat was picking up survivors; some of them turned back towards it. On the tug a hose was playing, forrard, dousing timber that was caught. The minesweeper was well clear now, thrall'd in smoke, the bows poking above it.

"Look," Russell said.

"Yes."

The 'sweeper was tilting. Smoke bellied up; then she filled and slid under, leaving her rubbish afloat in a vortex that slowly flattened. The paddle-boat that had been standing off

now swung about and drove in a slow arc round the tug, dropping a rope. The line came over and was held.

The fishing-boat closed-in, beam-on to the barge; men jumped the gap, emptying the barge of half its treble cargo, leaving it higher in the water with balers hard at work. The small boat pulled away. The steamer took up the slack on the tow-rope and her paddles turned, throwing out froth and bringing her stern down as the tug followed, and then the barge. A cheer went up from a group of men massed in the bows of the steamer.

"What's happened, Tubby?"

"I don't know."

"Well, we're off again," said Mills. "Got a new engine, eh?"

"Ye'. We're on our way, my puck-os."

They crouched down again, huddled together, their heads below the windstream. Men were calling out, somewhere in the barge, a lot of them wounded, asking for help, a few of them not understanding where they were, or why they were at sea. Binns said:

"Mike. We lost the kid."

"Whiting?"

"Yes."

"Poor little sod. Never stood a chance, did he?"

"Not much. Froome's all right, so's Pannet."

After a minute, Russell said, "Not a bad score. Five out of six." He had been trying to think who else there had been, but he was mixing up Harper and Smith. He said:

"Smith didn't catch it, did he?"

"No."

"There was Dave, though."

"Yes."

"'Oo's 'e?"

"Bloke we knew."

"Ah. Ne' mind. There's bin a lot of 'em, eh?"

"Ye'. Ye'."

They fell silent, listening to the men moaning in the stern of the barge, to the sing of the rope as it flicked the surface,

picking up spray and slinging it back. It touched their faces. It was the last thing Russell knew, before he slept: the cool salt spray on his face.

Binns watched the horizon to the south as the stern rose and fell, giving him regular glimpses of shipping. He could not see land any more. Sometimes he thought he could make out a gun-flash, reflecting down from the light cloud; but it could have been his eyes playing him up. There were no more shells; the barge was out of range now; but a fire was starting, eastwards, where an E-boat must be hunting at the fringe of the scattered convoy.

Planes were overhead, flying high. For a minute he mistook their sound for a boat's engine, then brought his head up to look at the sky. The sky was matted with cloud; the wind up there had torn gaps in it, and stars gleamed. He could not see the aircraft. It was not even possible to tell which way they were going; their sound rose steadily, and then diminished. The night was quiet again, but for the threshing of the paddles and the rush of water past the tug and the barge. The man was singing a hymn again, but softly now; and Binns listened, following the words, thinking the man must be singing to the others who were lying there, wounded, still sometimes calling for help.

He was aware of Russell beside him, and of Mills. His mind, slipping away and back over the border of sleep, played with their names, reminded of the long way they had come together, over the land and across this sea. He thought of other names, and tried to fit faces to them. Some were clear: Bellman, Harper, Smith; others were formless: B.S.M. Leech, Sergeant Bott, the young captain in Malins-du-pont. Then his mind reeled, and could not get back; and he slept.

He slept through dawn, but Mills woke, blinking at the faint grey light. He said something, but had no answer. Binns and Russell were curled up on the boards, inert. He looked at the others. Of those he could make out in the bleak light, most were asleep. He could not see Froome or Pannet. A man near him was covered with a blanket; blood had oozed away from his humped body, soaking into the coal-dust. One hand was

poking out, the fingers curled, alabaster-white under the grime. Mills looked for a long time at the hand, trying to feel something, some emotion about it; but he could not. The poor bastard was dead; what more was there to think?

The light strengthened, and in an hour he could see land, sliding over the gunwales, grey in the distance. He did not know what land it was. England, maybe. He wished there were a fag. He thought about smoking a fag, until he had to stop thinking; it was worse than hunger. Russell stirred, his right arm falling on to the boards. His eyes opened for an instant, two pockets of painful red.

"Wha'?"

"I's okay. You're okay."

"Ye'." His eyelids drooped. He shifted his arm but it fell again as he sank back.

Land ran by on their port side; cliffs, the pier of a seaside town; cliffs again; a waste of green grass shining under sunlight. Two ships were seaward of them, a destroyer and a tug, their decks black with men.

Mills got up and picked his way down the barge, looking at faces. In the bright glare of the early sunshine they looked in pain, all of them, in sleep and in pain, even those who had not been hurt, not lost blood nor bruised a bone. Pain was on all of them, covering them visibly as they lay huddled on the boards and the coal-dust. A few were awake; they raised their heads as Mills groped among them.

"Home, eh? England."

"Yeh. 'Ome sweet bleedin' 'ome."

"Where you goin', mate?"

"Get a cupper char at the Naffy."

"Then muck your luck, we got no Naffy 'ere."

He stumbled over them, looking at their faces; then he bent down.

"'Allo, son."

Pannet looked up at him, red-eyed.

"Where's Ken?"

"'Oo?"

"Froome. My——"

"Your china? 'E's okay. I seen 'im picked up. Either 'e's 'ere somewhere, or on another boat. Take my word, you'll find 'im, soon as we land."

"What about the others?"

"A' right. You okay?"

"I'm okay."

Mills crouched on his haunches, looking at Pannet's eyes. "I wanter tell you I'm sorry, mate, very sorry."

Pannet watched him with indifference. He barely remembered Mills. The sunlight was blanked across his eyes, and it was difficult to think straight. He didn't want to think about anything. The effort of asking about Ken and the others had been enough.

"What?" He tried to remember this little man. Mills. Name was Mills.

"I gave you two blokes a lot o' lip. I di'n' mean it, see? I want yer to know I'm sorry. I di'n' mean what I said, see?"

Pannet tried to sit up straight, but slumped down again.

"I don't remember."

Mills was beginning to sweat. He had never been a man to find it difficult to say he was sorry, but it was hard having to explain what he was sorry about. He put out one hand to steady himself as the barge heeled, turning on its course after the tug and the paddle-boat.

"Listen," he said. "I was shoutin' the bloody odds, see, about the Raff. I was sayin'——"

"It doesn't matter. I don't remember."

"But you gotter remember. I want yer to know——"

"I can't remember anything. It's okay, whatever it was." He shut his eyes, refusing to think, to be made to think. He must lie still, because of his leg. Something was wrong with it; he couldn't feel it. When he could force his head down, he would look at his leg. He wanted Mills to go away, and let him just lie here. Ken was all right; so everything was, except his leg.

"Well . . ." Mills crouched over him, baffled. He'd go away, and try again later. "Don' worry, mate. We're nearly 'ome, see? Blighty."

He straightened up, his face worried. As he shuffled away, going carefully over the sleeping men, Pannet opened his eyes and said:

"Can you see me all right?" He squinted up against the blinding sky, and saw the shadow of Mills.

"Yeh. 'Course I can."

"Can you see my legs?"

"Legs? Yeh. Why?"

"Both of them?"

The shadow swayed. The light drilled down into his eyeballs, gouging inside his head.

"Yeh. You got 'urt, did you?"

"They're all right? They look all right?"

"Yeh. You're okay. You got nothin' bad, mate, see?"

Pannet's head lolled sideways and his face cleared as sleep cuffed him senseless again. Mills went on, towards the bows.

Russell was awake. He was trying to pull himself to his feet. Mills steadied him. The wind sang past their ears.

"That land, cock-o?"

"Yeh."

"England?"

"'Course."

"Christ, so she's still there, eh?"

The shore-lanes were crowded with shipping. At Dover men walked across the decks of half a dozen boats before they could reach the quay. The piers were being used round the south-east coast; special trains were coming into the seaside towns. But this was the fifth day of Dynamo, and everywhere was full.

A group of ships, escorted by a destroyer, were making along the Thames. The destroyer left them, before Wapping, and they ran on towards the Port of London: a gaggle of river-boats, a lighter, a pack of tugs, and the paddle-steamer *Medway Queen*, towing the crippled tug and the coal-barge.

It was still before noon. The early sunshine had gone and clouds were over; but it was not dull. The sky was metallic, with a glare more aching than clear sunlight. The Thames was

smooth; its shipping lay towards the banks as the shaggy little convoy came through, running on west of the Pool. A few minutes ago, the men in the paddle-steamer had called across to a tug that was holding off, blowing its hooter to greet them. Their shouts had been ragged at first, then they had chanted in unison, "*Got—a—fag? Got—a—fag? Got—a—fag?*" The words had the rhythm of the other word that the children had called, again and again . . . *Chocolat! Chocolat!* The chant was heard by the crew of the tug and by many others among the small boats moored along the quays; and now the tug was nosing into midstream and one or two of the small boats were following. Soon they came alongside, and cigarettes were thrown across in their packets, in odd boxes, in tin-cans, in bundles of weighted rags, in anything that could be grabbed and tossed over to the packed decks where the many hands fluttered to catch them.

Russell was standing up in the barge, his grimed face split with pleasure as he watched. Mills was beside him, alert as a monkey for nuts.

"Catch 'em, Lofty—catch 'em fer Chri' sake!"

"Don't worry, cock-o!"

"You can 'ave my 'eart an' soul—jus' catch me one—I on'y want one, you c'n 'ave the rest!"

"Well, give us a chance——"

"You c'n 'ave all I got! Give yer me wife an' all me littl'uns—jus' say what you want, but get us a fag, fer the love o' Jesus, get us a fag!"

Binns leaned against the timbers, watching. He would like a fag in his mouth, very much; but meanwhile he had other joys, struggling up through the scum of bitterness and sickness and defeat that had formed in a cloying mire over his mind through the last long weeks. Mike was here; that was the big joy, rising quietly inside him. Mike, here and alive, his face a mask of grime, his eyes sunken and bloodshot, his right arm hanging limp, his uniform a rag of dirt and blood and ship's-oil and coal-dust—but still Mike, the lofty Celtic puck-o in the flesh, here and alive. And Mills, the funny one, the monkey-face, good for a laugh, good to soldier with, to put your trust in, to

be standing here with in this lowly boat, among this pathetic beaten mob of noble men.

And Pannet . . . Froome . . . they were here, somewhere. When this cork comes out, I'll be in England, my brothers. Others were not here, would never be. Dave, in a ditch, the wonderful watch torn from his wrist. Harper, buried under bricks with no blessing, other than theirs. Whiting, a drowned boy with never a real chance, born to die more than once and killed off young. And Smith; how was Smithy, where was he now? Poking in the ruins for a girl. If you could judge him, how would you judge a man like Smith?

He watched Mike, and Mills. Lofty and Shortarse, dying for a fag, living for the moment, this strange long-drawn moment that could never possibly come. Have a fag. Have a fag and forget the rest, and start all over again.

"Tubby!"

"What?"

They were tearing open a bundle, a shred of rag tied with a bit of string. In it were three cigarettes, one of them broken.

"Three of 'em! 'Ow did them fairies know?"

They gave one to Binns, and got a light from a man, touching their cigarettes to the burning tip of his in a solemn magical rite.

The barge ran on, under the noon glare of the sky; the barge, the tug and the paddle-boat, strung out towards Tower Bridge.